

WOMEN IN POLITICS AND SECURITY FOR WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN ALBANIA, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, KOSOVO, MONTENEGRO, NORTH MACEDONIA AND SERBIA 2025

WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN WESTERN BALKANS 2025





„Snažnije zajedno“/“Stronger together“;
Photographer: Radonja S.

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Contributions from the following partner organisations to Kvinna till Kvinna:

A 11 Initiative for Economic and Social Rights; Albanian Women Empowerment Network; Autonomous Women's Center; Coalition MARGINS; Foundation United Women Banja Luka; Kosovar Gender Studies Center; Kosovo Women's Network; Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM); REACTOR – Research in Action; Women's Rights Center

LAYOUT: Tijana Dinić

COVER PHOTO: Woman protester confronting a police officer at the protests in 2025, Belgrade, Serbia / Vlada Tadić/tadic_raw

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, November 2025

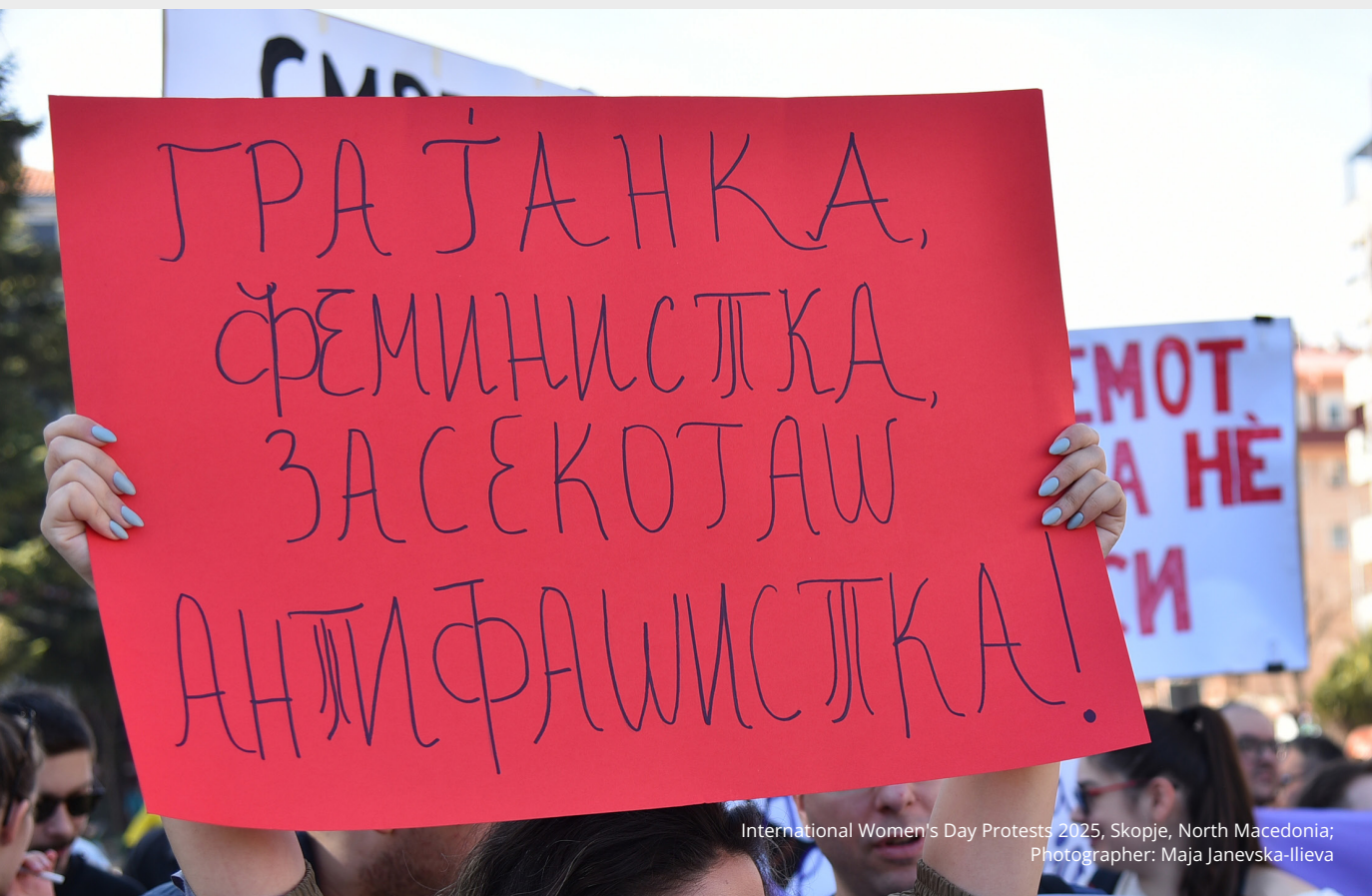


This report is financed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). Sida does not necessarily agree with the opinions expressed. Kvinna till Kvinna is responsible for the content.

THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA FOUNDATION

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has defended women's rights since 1993.

For every woman's right to be safe and to be heard. Today we are one of the world's leading women's rights organisations, working directly in areas affected by war and conflict to strengthen women's influence and power. We work closely together with over 100 local partner organisations across 20 countries to end violence against women, reach lasting peace and close the gender gap once and for all.



International Women's Day Protests 2025, Skopje, North Macedonia;
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ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS

EUR	Euros
AWEN	Albanian Women Empowerment Network
A 11	A 11 – Initiative for Economic and Social Rights
YUCOM	Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights
LRAD	Long-Range Acoustic Device
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
ECAP	Electoral Complaints and Appeals Panel
ILGA	International
GBV	Gender-based violence
KRIK	Crime and Corruption Reporting Network
CRTA	Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
FBiH	Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
Reactor	Reactor – Research in Action
WPN	Women's Political Network
WFD	Westminster Foundation for Democracy
EU	European Union
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
VAT	Value Added Tax
CEDAW	United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
UN	United Nations
CSO	Civil society organisation
WAVE	Women against Violence Europe
WCSO	Women's [rights] civil society organisation
BIRN	Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
WHRD	Women human rights defender
HRD	Human rights defender
GONGO	Government-organised non-governmental organisations
SLAPP	Strategic litigation against public participation
QIKA	Centre for Critique and Action

PURPOSE & METHODOLOGY

Women's Rights in Western Balkans provides unique longitudinal data on women's rights, serving as a benchmark for the six Western Balkan accession countries regarding women's rights and influence, for comparisons over time. This is the ninth edition of the report. The report is prepared as part of the regional programme "*EU Accession for Whom? Women's Rights and Participation in the Western Balkans, 2021–26*", to strengthen evidence-based advocacy. This programme is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and implemented by The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (Kvinna till Kvinna) in cooperation with women's civil society organisations (WCSOs) in the Western Balkans. It includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The overall objective of the programme is to strengthen women's rights and women's equal participation in decision-making in the Western Balkans, with the specific objective of increasing gender awareness and gendering the European Union accession.

The four areas analysed in these annual gender benchmarking publications are women in politics, gender-based violence (GBV), security of women human rights defenders (WHRDs), and women in the labour market, as these are priority areas that Kvinna till Kvinna and partner organisations have identified for advancing women's rights. This ninth edition highlights two of the four indicators; Women in Politics and Security for WHRDs. The scope of the current edition is to update relevant 2024/25 statistics and resources for each of the indicators, in each of the six Western

Balkan countries. For each indicator, and to the best of their abilities, authors followed up on accessible data and figures to determine to what extent Western Balkan women's social positions improved or worsened. This report reflects data collected in large part during the period of November 2024 to October 2025.

Data was collected through a desk study, using all accessible sources. As peer reviewers, partner organisations to Kvinna till Kvinna contributed their input to the report. The recommendations are based on conclusions from the report; recommendations to governments come from WCSOs and recommendations to international actors are from Kvinna till Kvinna and WCSOs. The responsibility of the content, however, lies solely with the authors.

The authors recognise that there are limitations in the research and gender benchmarking indicators. Taking into consideration the scope of the assignment, time-frame and limited resources, the authors developed specific sub-indicators within each of the thematic areas. One of the challenges has been to limit the number of indicators, as there are numerous other indicators that could have been used to measure women's social positions. As with any desk study methodology, the greatest barrier remains the lack of updated information and data from official sources in each of the studied countries.

We hope that this and previous editions of the report will provide useful tools, showing trends over time for women's rights in Western Balkans.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This ninth edition of *Women's Rights in Western Balkans* encompassed the 2024–23 reporting period with a focus on the indicators Women's in Politics and Security for Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs). One thing that was clear from the research process is that women's rights and social standing in the Western Balkans has not improved according to the observed indicators. Rather than progressing, however slowly, democracy (within which are also women's rights) is indeed regressing. Across the region, challenges such as weak rule of law, politicised judiciaries, high-level corruption, media capture, and limited protection of minority rights remain deeply entrenched. All six Western Balkan countries face varying degrees of state capture, a systemic form of political corruption where ruling elites exert undue influence over institutions, decision-making processes, and public discourse to maintain power and personal gain.

Though differing in scale and context, each of these mobilisations emerged from a similar affective landscape merging grief, frustration, and a profound sense of institutional betrayal. These protests did not occur in isolation. Rather, they echoed and reinforced one another across national borders. Each was triggered by a national tragedy—Serbia by the collapse of a railway station that killed 16 people, North Macedonia by a deadly fire in Kočani that claimed 61 lives, Montenegro by the mass shooting in Cetinje with 13 fatalities, and BiH by devastating floods that killed 27 people. The imagery, slogans, and tone of the protests often mirrored each other, as if grief had become a shared regional language of dissent.

Western Balkan countries grapple with significant challenges in their social protection systems, particularly in safeguarding the rights of vulnerable groups of women and enhancing their economic autonomy. These protection systems, aimed at alleviating poverty and promoting

social inclusion, are often unable to adequately reach and assist women in need. Presently, a considerable portion of social protection budgets in the Western Balkans is directed towards pension schemes, leaving scant resources for other initiatives, that could provide crucial support to women confronting economic difficulties.

During the reporting period, legal frameworks and quota systems drove numerical gains in many countries when it came to **women's political participation at the national level**, however these advances have not fundamentally reshaped the deeply gendered structures of political power. Across the region, there is a consistent disconnect between women's formal presence in parliaments and governments and their substantive influence over decision-making processes and policy agendas. The average percentage of women MPs in the Western Balkans is approximately 32%, which represents an overall four percentage point decrease in the region compared to 2022 statistics where the average was 36%. Comparatively, the regional average of men MPs during the reporting period was 68%. Despite any limited progress at the national level, at the **municipal level**, women's representation in local-level politics remains alarmingly low across all six Western Balkan countries. The average percentage of women mayors in the region is only 7%, with men holding 93% of mayoral positions. This is a decline from the 2022 *Women's Rights in Western Balkans* report which indicated an 8% average of women mayors (92% men, comparatively).

The position of **WHRDs** in the Western Balkans is increasingly precarious. The intensifying attacks on WHRDs across the Western Balkans reveal a region-wide strategy to suppress dissent, discredit feminist and queer advocacy, and undermine accountability. These attacks are not isolated or spontaneous, but rather part of a patterned, cross-country backlash against emancipatory politics, often orchestrated or tolerated by



FEMNET Exchange Meeting 2024,
Bar, Montenegro;
Photographer: Radonja S.

state and para-state actors. While the specific mechanisms vary by context, a set of common trends can be observed. The reporting period marked considerable anti-gender mobilisations across the region, fuelled in part by the global wave of anti-gender politics, in part accelerated by the Donald Trump administration. These developments have not remained confined to political rhetoric, and have directly contributed to a surge in attacks on WHRDs, with anti-gender campaigns emerging as a central force behind efforts to silence and delegitimise their work. The region has been characterised by **democratic backsliding** including shrinking space for civil society and activism. The situation is particularly challenging for (W)HRDs who engage with protection of women's rights, gender equality, LGBTIQ+ rights, environmental rights, the rights of ethnic minorities, as well as CSOs working for reconciliation in the region and demanding accountability for war crimes and crimes that took place during the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

The reporting period has marked the Western Balkans with **ongoing democratic backsliding and increased attacks against WHRDs**, which

in turn is also not a context conducive to creating a safe and enabling environment for civil society. Additionally, such an environment is also not in line with Article 11 (2) of the *Treaty on European Union* emphasises the importance of open, transparent, and regular dialogue between EU institutions and civil society. Responding to this challenge requires not just protective mechanisms, but a structural confrontation with the political economies of backlash.



Quote from Kvinna till Kvinna
partner organisation

The EU cannot afford to sideline these issues. It needs to move beyond 'expressing concern' and use firm actions and bold recommendations. This is what citizens from the Western Balkans expect.

CONTEXT

The years 2024 and 2025 were marked by political turbulence across Europe, including the Western Balkans, driven largely by a dense electoral calendar culminating in the significant 2024 European elections. The European elections ushered a new institutional mandate that should shape the European Union (EU) priorities through 2029. The newly elected European Parliament and the incoming European Commission leadership have launched a strategic agenda¹ that outlines the EU's renewed focus in three interconnected areas: safeguarding democracy, strengthening security, and fostering economic competitiveness. These priorities are expected to have significant implications not only for EU Member States but also for the Western Balkans, particularly in the context of ongoing enlargement processes and the region's alignment with EU standards.

At the heart of the new EU agenda is a reaffirmed commitment to fundamental rights. This includes upholding freedom of expression and assembly, combating online hate and gender-based violence (GBV), and ensuring rights-compliant migration management.² However, the strategic emphasis on security and competitiveness presents potential risks, particularly for civic space, media freedom, and the protection of marginalised communities, if rights are not adequately safeguarded during implementation.³ The EU's ongoing accession to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is a promising step toward greater coherence in rights protection, offering potential leverage for civil society actors in both Member States and candidate countries, including those in the Western Balkans.

Alongside the institutional reset in Brussels, these developments renewed attention on the

future of EU enlargement, particularly for the six Western Balkan countries, whose accession paths reflect a mix of cautious optimism and persistent stagnation. Despite renewed geopolitical urgency, the transformative power of the EU in the Western Balkans remains inconsistent. Countries in the region display varying levels of commitment and progress.⁴ In March 2024, the EU opened accession negotiations with **Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)**, a major milestone despite the lack of progress on key reforms. **Montenegro** and **Albania** advanced notably in 2024, with **Montenegro** provisionally closing seven negotiation chapters⁵ after years of stagnation and **Albania** swiftly opening two clusters. By contrast, **Serbia** failed to meet key rule of law benchmarks and did not open Cluster 3, while **Kosovo** remained stalled. **North Macedonia's** accession was further delayed by unresolved bilateral issues with Bulgaria, leading to its decoupling from Albania in the enlargement process.

The broader dynamics of democratic engagement in the Western Balkans were also shaped by a wave of elections across the region. Between 2024 and 2025, all six Western Balkan countries held either local, parliamentary, or presidential elections. These electoral cycles provided a key opportunity to assess not only political pluralism and institutional readiness, but also the extent to which commitments to gender equality and democratic participation were being upheld in practice.

Despite the presence of gender quota laws in all countries, persistent challenges undermined their effective implementation. In **North Macedonia**, for instance, the 2024 national elections exposed continued practices of placing women candidates

1 European Council, 'Strategic agenda 2024-2029', *European Council*, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/strategic-agenda-2024-2029/>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

2 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights – FRA, 'Fundamental Rights Report – 2025', *European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights - FRA*, Belgium, 2025, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2025/fundamental-rights-report-2025-fra-opinions>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

3 *Ibid.*

4 Balkan Civil Society Development Network, 'Civic Space Report 2024 - Western Balkans', *European Civic Forum*, 2025, <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-WESTERN-BALKANS.pdf>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

5 It is important to highlight the problem of stagnation; namely, four chapters were closed in this period of time, and the other three were closed from 2012 to 2017.

in less electable positions on party lists.⁶ In **Serbia**, even though the Law on the Unified Voter Register mandates a 40% quota with strict placement criteria, certain Local Election Commissions accepted lists that failed to fully comply with these provisions.⁷ These shortcomings underscore a broader pattern of superficial compliance with gender quotas, often decoupled from meaningful efforts to promote equal political participation. In North Macedonia, the 2024 elections were also shaped by a surge in disinformation targeting women and LGBTQI+ communities. The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) identified 108 online sources spreading narratives aimed at manipulating voter sentiment through nationalism, fearmongering, and attacks on women, LGBTQI+ communities, and Roma individuals.⁸ Civil society organisation (CSO) Reactor – Research in Action's (Reactor) report⁹ on the 2024 elections shows that gender perspectives remained largely absent in the election platforms in North Macedonia, with most parties failing to address women's political participation, GBV, or equality in a meaningful way. Only a few programmes included targeted measures, though even those lacked comprehensive, intersectional approaches to advance gender equality in political life. In Serbia's June 2024 local elections, a sharp rise in voters casting ballots outside polling stations (more than doubling in some municipalities compared to six months earlier) raised concerns about electoral integrity. The Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability's (CRTA) final report¹⁰ on the

Belgrade elections found a strong correlation between this voting method and improved results for the ruling party, prompting public debate over potential abuse of the right to vote outside polling stations.

These election dynamics unfolded within a broader context of democratic backsliding and stagnant civic freedoms across the Western Balkans, as reflected in the latest Freedom in the World report.¹¹ The 2025 report classifies all Western Balkans Six countries as „partly free”.¹² Among them, **Serbia** experienced a further decline in its score, dropping to 56 due to ongoing erosion of political rights and civil liberties under the ruling of Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka, SNS). In contrast, **Montenegro** ranked highest with 69 points, maintaining last year's score, followed by **Albania** (68) and **North Macedonia** (67), both showing either stability or slight improvement. **Kosovo** remained at 60 points, while **BiH**, though still the lowest-ranked in the region, slightly improved to 52. Across the region, persistent corruption, political polarisation, and pressure on media and civil society remain key challenges.

Across the region, challenges such as weak rule of law, politicised judiciaries, high-level corruption, media capture, and limited protection of minority rights remain deeply entrenched. All six Western Balkan countries face varying degrees of state capture,¹³ a systemic form of political corruption

6 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE, 'Republic of North Macedonia – Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, 24 April and 8 May 2024: ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report', *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE*, Warsaw, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights – ODIHR, 2024, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/e/576648.pdf>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

7 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE, 'Republic of Serbia – Local Elections, 2 June 2024: ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report', *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE*, Warsaw, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights – ODIHR, 2024, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/8/575488_1.pdf, (accessed 23 October 2025).

8 Gudachi, V., 'Online Narratives and Discrimination: Stakes for Minorities in North Macedonian Elections', *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network – BIRN*, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Online-narratives-and-discrimination.pdf>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

9 Reactor - Research in Action, 'Analysis of political parties programmes from a gender perspective – summary overview', *Reactor - Research in Action*, Skopje, 2024, <https://reactor.org.mk/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2024/09/Analysis-of-Political-%E2%80%93-Summary-Overview-1.pdf>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

10 Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability – CRTA, 'Belgrade Elections 2024 – Final Election Observation Report', *Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability – CRTA*, Belgrade, 2024, <https://crt.rs/en/belgrade-elections-2024-final-election-observation-report-summary/>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

11 Freedom House, 'Freedom in the World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights', *Freedom House*, Washington, 2025, [FITW_World_2025_Feb.2025.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/FITW_World_2025_Feb.2025.pdf), (accessed 23 October 2025).

12 In Freedom House's Freedom in the World index, the expression 'partly free' describes countries where there is limited respect for political rights and civil liberties. These states often feature some degree of electoral competition and pluralism, but experience serious weaknesses in the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, media freedom, and protection of minority rights. Citizens may face constraints on political participation, restrictions on civic space, and vulnerability to corruption and political pressure.

13 Zweers, W., de Ryck, J., and Šliogerytė, B., 'Security and Stability Scenarios for the Western Balkans: Are the EU, NATO and the Netherlands Prepared?', *Netherlands Institute of International Relations – Clingendael*, The Hague, 2025, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/Clingendael_Security_and_Stability_Scenarios_for_the_Western_Balkans.pdf, (accessed 23 October 2025).



International Women's Day Protests 2025, Skopje, North Macedonia;
Photographer: Maja Janevska-Ilieva

where ruling elites exert undue influence over institutions, decision-making processes, and public discourse to maintain power and personal gain. These governance shortcomings pose serious risks not only to democratic resilience but also to long-term economic and social stability. In addition to this, the weak state of the rule of law in the Western Balkans further undermines the region's economic stability and development. According to a 2024 report¹⁴ by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the Western Balkans Six countries significantly lag behind the EU in living standards, largely due to the inefficiency of state institutions and judicial systems, weak protection of property and intellectual rights, and the persistent perception of high-level corruption.

This persistent institutional inefficiency and deeply rooted corruption have not only hindered economic development but have also fuelled widespread public discontent, triggering a wave of protests across the region. In 2025, **Serbia, BiH, Montenegro, and North Macedonia** have

experienced a wave of protests sparked by national tragedies. Though differing in scale and context, each of these mobilisations emerged from a similar affective landscape merging grief, frustration, and a profound sense of institutional betrayal. These protests did not occur in isolation. Rather, they echoed and reinforced one another across national borders. Each was triggered by a national tragedy—Serbia by the collapse of a railway station that killed 16 people, North Macedonia by a deadly fire in Kočani that claimed 61 lives, Montenegro by the mass shooting in Cetinje with 13 fatalities, and BiH by devastating floods that killed 27 people. The imagery, slogans, and tone of the protests often mirrored each other, as if grief had become a shared regional language of dissent. In **Serbia**, some critics framed the protests as a continuation of North Macedonia's earlier Colourful Revolution, evoking a sense of regional *déjà vu*. Meanwhile, pro-government media and officials in **North Macedonia, Montenegro, and BiH** warned of a "Serbian scenario" taking root at home, using this frame to cast suspicion on protest organisers. In

14 European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 'Can the Western Balkans converge towards EU living standards?', *Balkan Innovation*, London, 2024, <https://www.balkaninnovation.com/docs/60/can-the-western-balkans-converge-towards-eu-living-standards>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

Serbia, government responses were especially severe, marked by violence against protesters, smear campaigns, disinformation, and even the reported use of sonic weapons to disperse crowds. In other countries, ruling elites relied on more familiar tactics of delegitimisation, like labelling protesters as “foreign agents”, “destabilisers”, or “queers”, in an effort to contain public outrage and prevent further mobilisation. These responses illustrate how protest in the Western Balkans not only spreads across borders but also triggers defensive reactions among ruling elites, revealing both the affective power and political threat of regional solidarity.

Amid growing public mobilisations across the Western Balkans, the actions of Milorad Dodik, president of Republika Srpska and long-time nationalist leader, illustrate the region’s accelerating authoritarian turn. Following his conviction for criminal offense of Failure to Implement Decision of the High Representative in 2025, Dodik escalated secessionist actions with open defiance of state institutions.¹⁵ While protests elsewhere reflected public outrage over corruption and neglect, Dodik’s moves signal a more direct assault on democratic stability, backed by regional allies and driven by illiberal, ethno-nationalist agendas.

These developments also raise challenging questions about the role of the EU in the region. Despite its stated commitment to democratic

reforms and rule of law, the EU’s enlargement approach has often enabled the persistence of so-called stabilitocracies¹⁶—regimes that maintain a facade of democracy while consolidating authoritarian control. Rather than applying consistent conditionality, the EU has at times prioritised geopolitical and economic interests over democratic principles. Persistent flaws in the EU’s approach, such as the politicisation and bilateralisation of the process, an overly technical “box-ticking” method, and a reluctance to enforce conditionality have further eroded its credibility. A striking example came in late 2024, when most Member States supported the opening of a new negotiation cluster with Serbia, despite clear democratic backsliding.

Altogether, the years 2024 and 2025 have laid bare the complex and often contradictory dynamics shaping the Western Balkans. While geopolitical shifts and renewed EU attention have reopened space for progress, the region remains mired in systemic challenges: state capture, democratic backsliding, and rising public unrest. **Without firmer commitment from both domestic leaders and EU institutions to uphold democratic principles over strategic convenience, the gap between formal alignment and lived realities will only deepen, leaving the region suspended between transformation and stagnation, with the risk of further entrenching authoritarianism across the region.**

15 Memišević, E., ‘Bosnian Serb Separatist Leader’s Defiance of Arrest Warrant Stirs Wartime Memories’, *Just Security*, 2025, <https://www.justsecurity.org/109994/bosnia-dodik-defiance-arrest-warrant/>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

16 Zweers, W., de Ryck, J., and Šliogerytė, B., ‘Security and Stability Scenarios for the Western Balkans: Are the EU, NATO and the Netherlands Prepared?’, *Netherlands Institute of International Relations – Clingendael*, The Hague, 2025, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/Clingendael_Security_and_Stability_Scenarios_for_the_Western_Balkans.pdf, (accessed 23 October 2025).

WOMEN IN POLITICS

Representation of women in politics and/or higher positions with decision-making power

Women's political representation in the Western Balkans reflects a paradoxical landscape: while legal frameworks and quota systems have driven significant numerical gains in many countries, these advances have not fundamentally reshaped the deeply gendered structures of political power. Across the region, there is a consistent disconnect between women's formal presence in parliaments and governments and their substantive influence over decision-making processes and policy agendas.

A key regional driver of women's political representation has been gender quota laws, adopted by all six Western Balkan countries, though with variations in scope. Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro require at least 30% on party lists be of the less-represented gender. BiH, North Macedonia, and Serbia have stronger quotas mandating 40% from the less-represented gender on candidate lists, with North Macedonia and Serbia introducing placement rules designed to enhance women's electability. These quotas have significantly improved descriptive representation across the region, with women now holding roughly 35–39% of parliamentary seats in countries like Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Their effectiveness, however, is often undermined by men-dominated party structures that not only manipulate list rankings but also exercise structural power and exploit inequalities that make it difficult for women to thrive and advance meaningfully in political life.

Beyond parliaments, a striking regional pattern concerns not only how many women are represented, but where they are positioned in executive governments. Throughout the Western Balkans, women ministers are disproportionately appointed to so-called "soft portfolios" like education, culture, social welfare, and tourism, areas perceived as extensions of women's traditional social roles and often carrying less political weight. In contrast, "hard portfolios" such

as finance, defence, foreign affairs, and internal security remain largely dominated by men. This trend persists even in countries like Albania, where women hold 71% of ministerial posts (29% men), but remain underrepresented in key state-building and economic portfolios.

For women in politics, these dynamics carry far-reaching consequences. This can include political parties treating gender justice as symbolic, and debates in parliament reproducing patriarchal stereotypes, wherein women politicians are deprived of the space to advance transformative policies. Instead, women politicians are forced to navigate a political environment where their rights and priorities are sidelined, leaving civil society as the primary driver of progress. The absence of serious debate on reproductive rights, abortion, or gender-affirming care demonstrates not only the marginalisation of women's issues but also a broader disregard for women as equal political actors. This weakens women's ability to influence decision-making, discourages new women from entering politics, and reinforces a political culture where equality is promised but not delivered.

Compounding these structural inequalities is the issue of limited and inconsistent gender-disaggregated data at the national level, which hinders efforts to monitor women's substantive participation and influence within parliaments and governments. Without comprehensive data on women's roles in leadership positions, committees, and key decision-making bodies, it is difficult to assess whether numerical gains in representation translate into real political power and impact. This problem is even more acute at the local/municipal level, where missing or incomplete data remains a significant obstacle to understanding and addressing women's political participation.

Cultural attitudes further reinforce these patterns of exclusion and inequality. Patriarchal norms remain deeply embedded across the region,

sustaining a political culture that resists genuine gender equality. In Montenegro, for example, surveys show that a majority of citizens, including nearly half of women, continue to view men as inherently better political leaders, reflecting the internalisation of gender stereotypes.¹⁷ Similar attitudes have been documented in Serbia, where women politicians are frequently framed in the media and political discourse primarily through their family roles or appearance rather than their competence or policy positions. In North Macedonia, women's marginalisation is reinforced by the limited prioritisation of gender equality even within party platforms and by the media's overwhelming focus on men party leaders during election campaigns. These cultural beliefs shape every stage of the political process. They influence voter preferences, constrain party candidate selection, limit the allocation of campaign resources to women candidates, and normalise the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. These factors perpetuate a cycle in which women's political participation remains formal rather than substantive, and their legitimacy as political actors is continually questioned or undermined.

Women politicians' visibility during elections is another regional challenge. Across the Western Balkan countries, women are less visible in campaigns and media coverage, even when they top party lists. For instance, in North Macedonia's 2024 elections, women appeared in just 20% of paid political advertisements, whereas men appeared in 80% of paid political advertisements, reflecting both media bias and party reluctance to invest in promoting women candidates.¹⁸

Moreover, GBV and harassment targeting women politicians are widespread. Women politicians in Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia report misogynistic attacks, threats, and intimidation, both online and offline, contributing to a hostile environment that discourages participation and limits women's ability to act as independent political actors.

Finally, this exclusion extends into the structure of public administration across the Western Balkans. Women comprise the majority of employees in sectors such as health, education, and social protection, making up 72% of the workforce in these sectors in BiH (men 28 %), and 56% of public administration staff in North Macedonia (men 44%). In Montenegro, women employed in the state administration are disproportionately rated as excelling in their work, 79% of women compared to just 38% of men, suggesting that women are not only well-represented as workers but consistently perform at a high level. However, this strong participation at the operational level does not translate into leadership: women remain significantly underrepresented in senior and decision-making positions within public institutions across the region, illustrating entrenched gender hierarchies that persist regardless of their qualifications and contributions. Women's roles are largely confined to support functions or technical expertise, while strategic leadership positions, particularly those with substantial authority or political influence, continue to be dominated by men. This imbalance reflects structural discrimination that rewards women's labour but systematically denies them access to institutional power, reinforcing broader patterns of gender inequality in political life.

In sum, the Western Balkans illustrates a familiar disjunction between formal equality and substantive equality. Gender quotas have raised women's descriptive representation, but their actual access to influence remains constrained by men-dominated party hierarchies, gendered segregation into "soft" roles, pervasive patriarchal attitudes, inadequate media visibility, missing national and local-level data, and a climate of hostility and harassment. Sustaining progress will require not only defending quota mandates but addressing these deeper cultural, institutional, and political barriers that continue to limit women's full and equal participation in political life.

17 United Nations Development Programme – UNDP, 'Gender equality profile of Montenegro', *United Nations Development Programme – UNDP*, Podgorica, 2021, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-01/undp-mne-publication-gender-equality-profile-2021.pdf>, (accessed 24 October 2025).

18 Metamorphosis – Foundation for Internet and Society. 'Bridging the Gender Gap: Strengthening Women's Representation in Political Advertising and Coverage on Internet Portals', *Metamorphosis – Foundation for Internet and Society*, Skopje, 2024, <https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/gender-policy-document-final-03022025.pdf>, (accessed 24 October 2025).

Albania

In the May 2025 parliamentary elections, Albania elected 49 women and 91 men to its 140-seat parliament, bringing women's representation to 35% compared to 65% of men. This outcome not only meets but exceeds the legal gender quota (mandating no less than 30% of the less-represented gender, reflecting gradual progress toward gender-balanced politics. Arguably, the presence of women in the Assembly is no longer symbolic, but it signals a shift in political culture, shaped by years of quota reforms, advocacy, and public debate. Yet, while numbers matter, the real test lies in women's ability to shape policy, lead within parties, and push for deeper structural change.

Following the formation of the new government after the May 2025 elections, Albania's executive branch includes 17 ministers¹⁹ out of which 8 are women and 8 are men, making women the clear majority with 71% representation. This

striking representation of women in decision-making positions continues the trend set by previous Rama-led governments and positions Albania among the European countries with the highest share of women in ministerial roles. While representation at the executive level signals a strong institutional commitment to gender equality, the impact of this leadership should ultimately be measured by how it shapes inclusive policies and drives systemic change.

Despite Albania's high level of women's representation in the executive branch, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)/ Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) Needs Assessment ahead of the May 2025²⁰ elections pointed to a persistent gap in legislative influence. While the government has become a good practice case study of gender inclusion, women remain under-represented



Regional Networking and Exchange Forum for Feminist Strategies –
"Solidarity is Our Strength" 2025, Bar, Montenegro;
Photographer: Milica Pavlović

19 As of the reporting period, Albania's executive government includes 17 Ministerial posts, of which 8 are held by men, 8 by women, and one by artificial intelligence. For methodological consistency, only human Ministers are included in the analysis.

20 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE, 'Republic of Albania – Parliamentary Elections, 11 May 2025: ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report 3–6 December 2024', Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE, Warsaw, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights – ODIHR, 2025, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/a/584622.pdf>, (accessed 24 October 2025).

in parliament, revealing a structural imbalance. This gap is not merely numerical; it reflects deeper structural issues within Albania's political system. Party leaders, who remain predominantly male, typically control candidate selection and placement on electoral lists, limiting women's chances of advancing within parliamentary hierarchies.²¹ Even once elected, women are less likely to occupy key roles such as committee chairs or leadership positions, and often experience tokenistic inclusion rather than genuine power-sharing.²²

Practical implementation of the well-established electoral laws in Albania continues to lag. Formal commitments to gender balance often fail to translate into substantive and sustainable change. Prior to the 2025 elections, a roundtable hosted by the United Nations (UN) and Albanian

electoral authorities highlighted several persistent challenges, including unequal access to campaign financing, limited media visibility, and barriers to long-term retention in elected office.²³ Further, structural barriers, including underfunding, weaker political networks, and persistent gender bias, further constrain their effectiveness.²⁴ These structural issues underscore the fragility of women's political gains, revealing that legal guarantees alone are insufficient without concrete mechanisms for enforcement, accountability, and cultural change within political institutions. Consequently, while the executive may present a gender-balanced facade, the legislative branch continues to mirror entrenched gendered power dynamics, demonstrating that numerical representation, without real access to decision-making power, does not ensure meaningful influence.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Despite ongoing commitments to gender equality and democratic representation, the political participation of women in BiH remains significantly limited. The most recent general elections were held on 2 October 2022, determining the composition of the tripartite presidency, the national Parliamentary Assembly, and various entity and cantonal bodies.

Women currently make up only 19% of the total 57 members in the bicameral Parliamentary Assembly of BiH. Within the House of Representatives, 10 out of 42 members are women, while in the House of Peoples, just 1 of 15 delegates are women. These figures highlight a persistent gender imbalance, with men holding nearly 81% of all Parliamentary seats.

In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) Parliamentary Assembly, women hold 55 of 178 mandates (approximately 31%) while men hold the remaining 123 mandates. Within the two chambers, women occupy 27 of 98 seats in

the House of Representatives (approximately 28% women compared to 72% of men) and 28 of 80 seats in the House of Peoples (35% women, 65% men), indicating comparatively stronger representation in the latter but still below one-third and far from parity. In the National Assembly of Republika Srpska, out of a total of 83 elected members, 60 are men and only 23 are women, accounting for approximately 28% of women's representation (72% for men). The situation is even more stark in the Assembly of the Brčko District, where only 3 of the 31 members are women, representing just 10%, compared to men's representation which is 90%. These figures highlight the persistent underrepresentation of women in political decision-making at the entity and district levels, falling short of both national gender equality commitments and international standards.

At the state level in BiH, gender representation in government remains highly unequal. Out of nine ministries, only one is currently headed

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Daco, G., 'Round Table: Promoting women's participation in the May 2025 elections', United Nations Albania, 27 February 2025, <https://albania.un.org/en/289951-round-table-promoting-womens-participation-may-2025-elections>, (accessed 24 October 2025).

²⁴ Arqimandriti, M., 'Achieving gender equality in political party financing in Albania', Portal for Parliamentary Development – agora, Westminster Foundation for Democracy Limited – WFD, 2023, https://www.agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/agora-documents/Gender%20equality%20in%20political%20party%20financing_Final.pdf, (accessed 24 October 2025).

by a woman — Dubravka Bošnjak, Minister of Civil Affairs.²⁵ At the same time, the Council of Ministers is chaired by Borjana Krišto, one of the few women to hold such a high-ranking position in BiH politics. Some counts therefore register one woman minister, while others include both Krišto and Bošnjak, bringing the number to two women in the state-level executive. In either case, the overall picture shows a serious lack of women in executive decision-making at the state level.

Representation in the executive branch at the entity level reflects similar disparities. Out of 17 ministerial positions in the FBiH Government, including the Prime Minister, only 4 are held by women. These include Sanja Vlasić (Minister of Culture and Sports), Andrijana Katić (Minister of Transport and Communications), Jasna Duraković (Minister of Education and Science), and Nasiha Pozder (Minister of Environment and Tourism). The underrepresentation of women at both legislative and executive levels underscores the structural and systemic barriers that continue to hinder women's full participation in political decision-making processes in BiH.

In the executive branch of Republika Srpska, gender disparities remain evident. The current Government consists of 17 members, including the Prime Minister, and 16 total Ministers. Of these, only four are women, amounting to just 23% of women's representation. This includes Senka Jujić (Minister of Management and Local Self-Governance), Zora Vidović (Minister of Finances), Željka Stojčić (Minister of Education and Culture), and Selma Čabrić (Minister of Family, Youth and Sports). The remaining 13 positions (84%), including the Prime Minister and the majority of key Ministries, are held by men.

The implementation of the Law on Gender Equality in political and civil service appointments remains insufficient, as women hold less than one third of positions in any of the current governments. Since the 2022 General Elections, there has been some progress in women's

participation in decision-making, particularly through the appointment of Lidija Bradara as the President of FBiH, appointments of deputy ministers in the Council of Ministers, as well as the presence of women in high-level roles such as Chairwoman of the Council of Ministers, a member of the Presidency, and one cantonal Prime Minister. However, women's representation in ministerial positions across other constitutional units has either stagnated or declined.

As highlighted in the *Country Gender Analysis: Bosnia and Herzegovina*,²⁶ women are still largely appointed to positions that align with traditional gender norms, particularly in areas like education, culture, and tourism. This pattern is not only shaped by enduring beliefs about women's inherent suitability for certain roles but also by systemic occupational segregation. Importantly, these ministries, frequently led by women, have not undergone meaningful institutional or policy reform, which may signal their limited prioritisation within the overall governance framework.

Compared to the low participation in decision-making positions, women are essential to the functioning of public services in BiH. Although they make up a significant share of the workforce (42% in public administration, defence, and social insurance, and as much as 72% in education, healthcare, and social protection),²⁷ their roles are mostly limited to operational and support functions. These figures, published by the BiH Agency for Statistics in the report on Demography and Social Statistics, illustrate the central role women play in maintaining key public services.²⁸ However, leadership and decision-making positions continue to be dominated by men. Literature indicates²⁹ that even in sectors where women form the majority, such as education and social affairs, institutional cultures often resist gender equality, with ongoing reports of discrimination and bias. This disparity reflects a systemic pattern, while women carry much of the public sector's workload, they are systematically denied access to influence and authority.

25 Sazivi Vijeća Ministara, 'Sazivi Vijeća ministara Bosne i Hercegovine dani su po razdobljima nakon općih izbora, održanih 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014, 2018. i 2022. Godine', Vijeća Ministara, 2022, https://www.vijeceministara.gov.ba/pdf_doc/sazivi%2025-2-2015%20HRV.pdf, (accessed 29 October 2025).

26 The American Institutes for Research – AIR, 'Monitoring and evaluation Support Activity II (Measure II) – Country gender analysis: Bosnia and Herzegovina, USAID, 2024, https://measurebih.com/uimages/USAID_MEASURE20II_GenderAnalysis-508_f.pdf, (accessed 24 October 2025).

27 Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina – BHAS, 'Demography and Social Statistics: Persons in Paid Employment by Activity', Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina – BHAS, 2024, https://bhas.gov.ba/data/Publikacije/Saopštenja/2024/LAB_02_2024_03_1_BS.pdf, (accessed 1 August 2024).

28 *Ibid.*

29 The American Institutes for Research – AIR, 'Monitoring and evaluation Support Activity II (Measure II) – Country gender analysis: Bosnia and Herzegovina, USAID, 2024, https://measurebih.com/uimages/USAID_MEASURE20II_GenderAnalysis-508_f.pdf, (accessed 24 October 2025).

Kosovo

Following the February 2025 parliamentary elections in Kosovo, the 120-member Assembly was finally constituted in late August after months of political deadlock. Among the 120 MPs, 39 are women (32%) and 81 are men (68%), reflecting a stable level of women's representation compared to the previous legislature. The gender quota system continues to play a decisive role in maintaining this representation. Media in Kosovo reported that of the 39 women MPs, 13 entered through the quota mechanism despite requirements that at least one in every three candidates on party lists be of the underrepresented gender.³⁰ The remaining 26 women MPs were elected directly by votes. This outcome suggests that while quotas remain essential for guaranteeing a baseline of inclusion, progress toward parity is slow. Persistent structural barriers, such as entrenched party hierarchies, men-dominated informal networks, and unequal access to campaign resources, continue to limit women's advancement from candidacy to genuine political influence.

Kosovo's 2025 parliamentary elections did not result in the formation of a government, leaving the broader questions of representation, including women's representation, unresolved. This political deadlock has direct implications for women in politics. The absence of functioning institutions delays the appointment of women to ministerial posts and leadership positions that are crucial for advancing gender equality agendas. In practice, this means that even hard-won guarantees of representation lose their force when institutions are paralysed, leaving women's political participation suspended in a prolonged vacuum of governance.

According to the 2022 edition of *Women's Rights in Western Balkans*, women accounted for 33%

of members of parliament in Kosovo and held five ministerial positions, including key portfolios such as justice and foreign affairs, following the 2021 elections. While these figures demonstrated important progress, they also revealed persistent obstacles such as men-dominated party structures and widespread gender-based hate speech specifically targeting women in politics.³¹ In the current context, however, these gains remain in suspension: the 2025 elections have yet to produce a functioning parliament or government, leaving the gender composition of institutions undefined. This stalemate not only delays the confirmation of women in leadership roles but also risks reversing the fragile momentum achieved in the previous electoral cycle.

Some significant initiatives were undertaken in the previous Assembly that deserve to be highlighted. On 19 November 2024, women members of the Kosovo Parliament, supported by OSCE Mission in Kosovo, signed an official declaration³² pledging to actively combat GBV against women in politics and public life. The declaration, described by OSCE Acting Head Cornelia Taylor as "a commitment to solidarity and a call to safeguard women's dignity and rights," signals at least a willingness to take steps toward raising awareness and fostering institutional and media support. Signatories emphasised the need for media to employ gender-sensitive language, urge accountability focused on perpetrators, and encourage male allies to denounce abuse, recognising that normalising harassment undermines women's participation in public life.

Ahead of Kosovo's 2025 elections, the major political parties continue to treat gender justice as a symbolic add-on rather than a transformational priority.³³ While statistics reveal women's deep exclusion from the

30 Telegrafi, '26 women became deputies with votes, 13 with gender quota', Telegrafi, 08 November 2019, <https://telegrafi.com/en/26-gra-u-bene-deputete-vota-13-kuote-gjinore/>, (accessed 07 November 2025).

31 Dičić Kostić, N., et al., 'Women's rights in Western Balkans: Women in politics, gender-based violence and security for women human rights defenders in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia', The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2022, <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/The-Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-Womens-Rights-in-Western-Balkans-2022.pdf>, (accessed 24 October 2025).

32 Zeqiri, A., 'Women for Women: Kosovo MPs Commit to Combating Gender-Based Violence', Prishtina Insight, 20 November 2024, <https://prishtinainsight.com/women-for-women-kosovo-mps-commit-to-combating-gender-based-violence/>, (accessed 24 October 2025).

33 Halili, D., 'Çka thonë programet politike për drejtësinë gjinore?', QIKA, 21 January 2025, <https://qika.org/perspective-post/cka-thone-programet-politike-per-drejtesine-gjinore/>, (accessed 24 October 2025).

labour market and systemic barriers in areas like childcare, property rights, and protection from violence, party programmes largely recycle pro-natalist policies and rhetoric that tie women's value to motherhood and the nuclear family. Vetëvendosje, despite holding power, has failed to deliver structural reforms, often conceding to conservative narratives, while the Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës), the Democratic Party of Kosovo (Partia Demokratike e Kosovës), and the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës) coalition frame gender equality almost exclusively through the family lens. What remains absent is a feminist vision that addresses intersectional inequalities and prioritises women's autonomy, labour rights, and bodily integrity.

In the context of the 2025 elections in Kosovo, women's visibility in the campaign and media coverage remained notably limited. Women were significantly underrepresented in campaign events and media coverage. According to the Centre for Critique and Action (QIKA),³⁴ out of 606 election-related TV reports, only 14%, or just 86 reports, featured women candidates and 86% featured men candidates. During the elections, a significant amount of hate speech and defamatory language was spread, primarily targeting women candidates. Much of this came from third parties, individuals or groups aligned with political parties, often supporters acting on their behalf.³⁵ This hate speech was gendered in nature, with women candidates disproportionately subjected to defamatory narratives, personal attacks, and online harassment aimed at undermining their credibility and discouraging their participation in politics. Despite these hostile tactics, some of the targeted women successfully secured enough votes to enter parliament, highlighting both the intensity of the harassment and their resilience.

Elections further reveal other forms of disrespect women in politics disproportionately face when compared to their men counterparts. Namely,

during the election campaign, social media monitoring uncovered artificial images of men parliamentary candidates doctored to make them appear dressed as women, aiming to ridicule and discredit them.³⁶ One such TikTok video targeted Democratic League of Kosovo candidate Arben Gashi, falsely portraying him in women's clothing to mock his character and political credibility. This tactic is deeply misogynistic, as it relies on the assumption that associating men with femininity is shameful, thereby reinforcing harmful stereotypes that devalue women and femininity itself. Such actions not only seek to undermine individual candidates but also normalise ridicule based on gender expression, contributing to a broader culture of hostility toward women, gender non-conforming people, and gender equality in politics. The Coalition for the Family, composed largely of former Lëvizja Vetëvendosje MPs and supported by Aleanca Kosova e Re leader Behgjet Pacolli, emerged as one of the most vocal opponents of LGBTQI+ rights in Kosovo.³⁷ They consistently campaigned against same-sex marriage and criticised financial support for LGBTQI+ initiatives.

In the run-up to the 9 February 2025 parliamentary elections, Kosovo's political parties once again referred to gender equality in their platforms, but these references were superficial and lacked meaningful commitments. Instead of concrete measures or policies that would advance women's rights, parties relied on symbolic language that failed to address the real barriers women face.³⁸ At the same time, the Kosovo Assembly has continued to treat gender issues through a narrow, patriarchal lens, reducing women primarily to their roles as mothers within nuclear families. This was clearly visible in debates on the Draft Law on Reproductive Health and Medically Assisted Conception. The most contested provision, Article 15, would have allowed single women over the age of 18 to access *In vitro* fertilisation through the public health system at lower cost.³⁹ Conservative deputies blocked the law, framing the debate with gender-biased arguments and misinformation

34 QIKA, 'Fushata zgjedhore po karakterizohet me pjesëmarrje të ultë të grave dhe gjuhë të urrejtjes', QIKA, 27 January 2025, <https://qika.org/fushata-zgjedhore-po-karakterizohet-me-pjesemarrje-te-ulte-te-grave-dhe-gjuhe-te-urrejtjes/>, (accessed 24 October 2025).

35 Balkan Investigative Reporting Network – BIRN, 'Hate Speech Marred Kosovo's 2025 Election, BIRN Report Finds', Balkan Investigative Reporting Network – BIRN, 2025, <https://birn.eu.com/news-and-events/hate-speech-marred-kosovos-2025-election-birn-report-finds/>, (accessed 24 October 2025).

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

38 Halili, D., 'What do political platforms say about gender justice?', Kosovo 2.0, Prishtina, 2025, <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/what-do-political-platforms-say-about-gender-justice/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

39 *Ibid.*

that dismissed women's autonomy over their own bodies. The Assembly's refusal to recognise reproductive rights as a matter of equality and health sent a powerful message: women's bodily autonomy is not respected or prioritised by political representatives. This silence extends to other essential issues, such as access to safe abortion and gender-affirming care, leaving the needs of trans women and non-binary people systematically erased.

Women remain significantly present in Kosovo's public administration, yet their participation decreases as decision-making power increases. At the central level, women constitute approximately 44% of public administration staff (men 56%), and 33% (men 67%) at the local level.⁴⁰ However, by 2022 only about 23% of decision-making positions were held by women.⁴¹ Representation in public enterprises is stronger, with women making up approximately 46% of employees (men 54%), including 30% of board chairpersons (men 70%), 22% of chief executive officers (men 78%), and 30% of chief financial officers (men 70%). Despite this, structural and cultural barriers persist.

Namely, while nearly one-third of women working in public administration expressed interest in leadership roles, more than half believed it was unlikely they would ever attain them, citing lack of support and entrenched doubts about women's leadership abilities.⁴²

In addition to this trend, women politicians that hold public office in Kosovo continue to face widespread harassment, both online and within political institutions. Women politicians report being subjected to misogynistic speech, bullying, and degrading remarks, not only from political opponents, but also from within their own parties. They are often portrayed as lacking leadership capacity and decision-making skills, reinforcing gender stereotypes that undermine their legitimacy.⁴³ Importantly, attacks are frequently gendered in nature. Rather than focusing on their policies or political positions, women are targeted for their appearance, personal lives, or gender identity. This persistent hostility creates an environment of intimidation that discourages women's full and equal participation in political life and public discourse.⁴⁴

Montenegro

Despite progress in gender equality policies over the years, women in Montenegro remain significantly underrepresented in political decision-making. As of the early parliamentary elections held on 11 June 2023, women hold only 28% of seats in the national Parliament compared to 72% held by men, occupying 23 out of 81 seats. This percentage reflects a modest presence, still far from parity, and illustrates the persistent gender imbalance in legislative power.

In the executive branch, the gender gap is even more pronounced. Out of 26 ministerial positions, including seven deputy prime ministers and one minister without portfolio, only seven are held by women, accounting for just 23% of the total. Women currently lead ministries traditionally associated with social or „soft“ portfolios, such as education, culture, and tourism, but are notably absent from positions linked to finance, security, or infrastructure.

40 Balkan Policy Group Research – BPRG, 'Public Administration Reform in Kosovo: constant struggle to make it', Balkans Policy Research Group – BPRG, Prishtina, 2020, https://balkansgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Public-Administration-Reform-in-Kosovo_Constant-Struggle-to-Make-It-4.pdf, (accessed 28 October 2025).

41 Equal Future, 'Women's representation in politics and public administration: Kosovo', Equal Future, 2024, <https://www.equalfuture-eurasia.org/womens-representation-in-politics-and-public-administration/kosovo>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

42 Riinvest Institute, 'Women in Decision-Making in the Public and Private Sector in Kosovo', Agency for Gender Equality, Prishtina, 2022, <https://www.riinvestinstitute.org/En/projektet-e-pa-laquo-rfunduara/427/women-s-decision-making-in-the-public-and-private-sector-in-kosovo/>, (accessed 30 October 2025).

43 Vuniqi, L., Kuotat gjinore dhe debati mbi to, Prishtina, Kosovar Gender Studies Center, 2024, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/665e239e6c34b76167010920/675bf7885de2bf2dcde11c77_Raporti_QKSGJ_Struktura_compressed.pdf, (accessed 30 October 2025).

44 Vuniqi, L., Kuotat gjinore dhe debati mbi to, Prishtina, Kosovar Gender Studies Center, 2024, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/665e239e6c34b76167010920/675bf7885de2bf2dcde11c77_Raporti_QKSGJ_Struktura_compressed.pdf, (accessed 30 October 2025).

Ministers Anđela Jakšić Stojanović (Minister of Education, Science and Innovation), Naida Nišić (Minister of Labour, Employment and Social Dialogue), Tamara Vujović (Minister of Culture and Media), Maja Vukićević (Minister of Transport), Simonida Kordić (Minister of Tourism), Maida Gorčević (Minister of European Affairs) and Majda Adžović, appointed as a head of newly established Ministry of Public Works represent the current women's leadership within government, yet their limited number signals the ongoing structural barriers women face in reaching the highest levels of political power.

Compared to the low participation in leadership and decision-making positions, women in Montenegro represent a strong and capable segment of the public administration workforce. According to data from the Human Resources Management Authority,⁴⁵ 79% of women employed in state administration bodies are rated as excelling in their work, compared to only 38% of men. This striking disparity underscores a persistent contradiction. While women consistently demonstrate high performance and commitment, they are still significantly underrepresented in positions of power and influence.

These patterns of underrepresentation reflect broader societal attitudes. Although Montenegro's Gender Equality Index⁴⁶ improved from 55 in 2019 to 59.3 in 2023, according to the latest edition of the Gender Equality Profile of Montenegro from 2021,⁴⁷ more than half of Montenegrin citizens believe that men make better political leaders than women. While this perception is more prevalent among men, nearly half of all women surveyed share this view. Consistently, a majority also associate leadership abilities more strongly with men, reinforcing the belief that leadership roles should predominantly be held by them. However, findings from

Women's Rights Centre's 2023 research on women's political participation⁴⁸ provide a more nuanced picture: while a significant share of the active voting body in Montenegro recognises the importance of women's engagement, structural and cultural barriers persist. The study revealed that an increase in the percentage of women in decision-making positions would motivate two-fifths of respondents to become more politically active. At the same time, 54% of respondents agree that a clear division of gender roles in Montenegrin society discourages women from political participation, and over half support changes to electoral law to ensure greater representation. Importantly, 70% of respondents believe that women can make a real change through their participation in politics. Taken together, these findings show a society in transition: deeply entrenched stereotypes still constrain women's political presence, but public awareness of the need for greater inclusion is steadily increasing.

Women in politics in Montenegro, alongside with activists and journalists, face escalating levels of GBV and gender-based discrimination.⁴⁹ Women MPs such as Vesna Bratić and Draganja Vuksanović-Stanković were subjected to daily abuse, both online and offline, because of their gender. While Bratić was assigned 24-hour police protection following threats, Vuksanović-Stanković has reported enduring systemic sexism and harassment within and beyond the parliament.⁵⁰

In 2024, political parties in Montenegro received 693,500 Euros (EUR) from the state budget to finance the work of women's branches within political parties.⁵¹ These funds were legally intended to support training, networking, and strengthening solidarity among women in politics. However, the civil sector and international organisations have repeatedly warned that this money was frequently misused

45 United Nations Development Programme – UNDP, 'Gender equality profile of Montenegro', United Nations Development Programme – UNDP, Podgorica, 2021, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-01/undp-mne-publication-gender-equality-profile-2021.pdf>, (accessed 24 October 2025).

46 The Gender Equality Index measures gender equality on a scale of 1 (full inequality) to 100 (full equality) in six core domains: work, money, knowledge, time, power, health and two additional domains: intersecting inequalities and violence.

47 United Nations Development Programme – UNDP, 'Gender equality profile of Montenegro', United Nations Development Programme – UNDP, Podgorica, 2021, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-01/undp-mne-publication-gender-equality-profile-2021.pdf>, (accessed 24 October 2025).

48 Women's Rights Center, 'Rodna analiza parlamentarnih izbora 2023', Women's Rights Center, 2024, <https://womensrightscenter.org/rodna-analiza-parlamentarnih-izbora-2023/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

49 Aćimić Remiković, M., and Sjöberg, L., 'Montenegrin gender „protections“ and the limits of gender equality laws', Women's Studies International Forum, vol. 107, 103011, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2024.103011>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

50 *Ibid.*

51 Radulović, T., 'Novac ženskih organizacija partije u Crnoj Gori trošile na kredite, kongrese i komunalije', Radio Slobodna Evropa, 14 March 2024, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/zene-politika-ucisce-finansije-stranke/32860055.html>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

and not allocated for its intended purposes. Concerns over the non-transparent and, in some cases, illegal expenditure of funds dedicated to women's organisations within political parties were first raised by the State Audit Institution in its 2021 reporting and remain unresolved. The 2023 State Audit Reports, published in October 2024, confirmed that the vast majority of political parties still failed to comply with their legal obligations to transparently report on the financing and activities of their women's organisations.⁵² Despite significant public investment, these systemic irregularities continue to undermine efforts to strengthen women's political participation and highlight the urgent need for greater oversight and accountability.

The limited presence of women in political decision-making in Montenegro highlights a persistent gap between gender equality initiatives and actual structural change. Over the past decade, efforts have been made to address this imbalance, most notably through the establishment of the Women's Political Network (WPN) in 2017,⁵³ and the 2024 initiative of women leaders "Half the Sky, Half the Land, Half the Power".⁵⁴ However, WPN's functionality was limited, which limited its long-term impact. On the other hand, the establishment of the Women's Club within the Montenegrin Parliament⁵⁵ proved significantly more effective during its previous mandate, initiating and supporting key measures such as the adoption of the Alimony Fund Law, joint efforts to combat GBV, and the advocacy for introducing a 40%

combined gender quota system. Unfortunately, after the convocation of Parliament in 2023, the Women's Club had also become largely nonfunctional, with visible political disparities among parties undermining its ability to act collectively. Taken together, these developments demonstrate that while initiatives exist, their effectiveness remains inconsistent, underscoring the urgent need for deeper institutional reforms, cross-party collaboration, and stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure meaningful progress toward gender equality in political representation.

On April 22, 2024, the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights as well as the CSO Women's Rights Centre welcomed the ongoing comprehensive reforms to Montenegro's electoral legislation,⁵⁶ describing them as a critical opportunity to enhance all aspects of the electoral process—advancements that could significantly expand women's political participation. They emphasised that amendments to the Law on the Election of Councillors and Members of Parliament, the Law on Financing Political Entities and Election Campaigns, and the adoption of a new Law on Government should not be squandered opportunities. These reforms must ensure clear legal guarantees for gender-inclusive representation, rather than relying on goodwill or temporary concessions. The organisations asserted that women's political participation must be treated as a legal obligation, not a matter of political negotiation, and must be safeguarded from day-to-day political bargaining.

52 Crna Gora Državna Revizorska Institucija, 'Senator Kovačević na NDI radionici posvećenoj finansiranju ženskih organizacija unutar političkih subjekata', DRI, Podgorica, <https://www.dri.co.me/aktuelnost/senator-kovacevic-na-ndi-radionici-posvecenoj-finansiranju-zenskih-organizacija-unutar-politickih-subjekata/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

53 European Institute for Gender Equality, 'Women's Political Network (WPN) Montenegro', European Institute for Gender Equality, https://eige.europa.eu/about/eu-candidate-countries-and-potential-candidates/good-practices/womens-political-network-wpn-montenegro?language_content_entity=en, (accessed 28 October 2025).

54 United Nations Development Programme – UNDP, 'Women leaders from the Government, Parliament, Judiciary and civil society united to create a new gender equality agenda in Montenegro', United Nations Development Programme – UNDP, Podgorica, 2024, Women leaders from the Government, Parliament, Judiciary and civil society united to create a new gender equality agenda in Montenegro | United Nations Development Programme, (accessed 28 October 2025).

55 Women's Rights Center, 'Osnivanje ženskog kluba Skupštine Crne Gore', Women's Rights Center, 2021, <https://womensrightscenter.org/osnivanje-zenskog-kluba-skupstine-crne-gore/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

56 Women's Rights Center, 'Zajednička pozicija ČŽP- a i Ministarstva ljudskih i manjinskih prava povodom sveobuhvatne reforme izbornog zakonodavstva – političko učešće žena', Women's Rights Center, 2024, <https://womensrightscenter.org/zajednicka-pozicija-czp-a-i-ministarstva-ljudskih-i-manjinskih-prava-povodom-sveobuhvatne-reforme-izbornog-zakonodavstva-politicko-ucesce-zena/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

North Macedonia

Women's political representation in North Macedonia remains uneven across different branches of government. Following the 2024 parliamentary elections, women hold 47 (compared to men who hold 73) out of 120 seats in the Assembly, accounting for 39% of women MPs, one of the highest proportions of women's representation in the region. This marks an achievement that is largely attributed to the gender quota mechanism that ensures a minimum level of women's inclusion on candidate lists. However, despite this relatively strong numerical presence, gender equality has not been substantially advanced through legislation adopted by this Parliament. In fact, there have been signs of regression, most notably in the Law on Primary Education, where all references to gender equality as a concept were deliberately removed. This reflects a broader pattern in which the presence of women in parliament does not automatically safeguard progress on gender-sensitive policies, as many women MPs follow the positions of their party leadership rather than advancing gender equality agendas. This dynamic, observed across the region, has also been evident in previous parliamentary terms in North Macedonia as well, namely during debates on the Law on Termination of Pregnancy and the Law on Protection against Discrimination.

A 2024 analysis by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD)⁵⁷ based on reports published by Reactor,⁵⁸ confirmed that all political parties formally complied with the legal requirements, which stipulate that at least 40% of candidates must be women, including one woman in every three consecutive candidates and an additional woman in every group of ten. However, the analysis also showed that women were frequently placed in the lowest positions allowed by law, positions with little chance of election. While this practice does not violate the legal requirements, it undermines their intent by limiting the possibility

of exceeding the minimum threshold and increasing women's actual representation in Parliament.

Yet, even this modest progress at the parliamentary level has not extended to the executive branch. Of the 17 ministerial posts in the current government, only three are held by women, representing approximately 18% of the cabinet. The women ministers include Vesna Janeva (Minister of Education and Science), Sanja Božinovska (Minister of Energy, Mining and Mineral Resources), and Gordana Dimitrievska-Kočovska (Minister of Finance). Notably, and unlike many of the other Western Balkan countries, women politicians are leading portfolios traditionally dominated by men, such as energy and finance, signalling a shift, albeit limited, toward breaking gendered divisions of political labour. However, their underrepresentation in the executive remains a reflection of the persistent structural barriers to women's equal participation in high-level decision-making.

This disconnect is also evident in the wider public administration. Women comprise the majority of employees in public institutions, 56% compared to approximately 44% men (2022),⁵⁹ demonstrating that they are a strong and indispensable part of the public workforce. Despite this, women rarely occupy senior or decision-making roles, indicating a clear gender hierarchy within state structures. Their contributions sustain the functioning of institutions, yet their access to influence and power remains restricted.

One potential reason for this is the systemic imbalances and entrenched gender inequalities that shape political life, reflected in the persistently low visibility of women in public political debates. During the 2024 Parliamentary election campaign in North Macedonia, women's presence in the media, particularly on online news

57 Jovanovska, B. 'Анализа на усвојувањето и спроведувањето на заложбите на политичките партии за поголема политичка застапеност на жените', Westminster Foundation for Democracy – WFD, 2024, <https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/Analysis%20on%20the%20political%20parties%20commitments%20towards%20greater%20political%20participation%20of%20women%20MKD.pdf>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

58 Petkovska, N., 'Локални Избори 2021: Осврт На Кандидатските Листи За Градоначалници И Избраните Носители Од Родов Аспект', Reactor – Research in Action, 2021, https://reactor.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/analiza_od_rodov_aspekt_lokali_izbori.pdf, (accessed 28 October 2025).

59 UN Women, 'Country Gender Equality Profile of North Macedonia', UN Women Europe and Central Asia, Skopje, UN Women, 2023, https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/unw_cgep_nmk_eng_web.pdf, (accessed 28 October 2025).

portals, remained limited, a result of both the stereotypical approaches of political parties and the broader societal and media bias that sidelines women's voices.⁶⁰ Women's visibility in the media during the 2024 Parliamentary election campaign in North Macedonia remained limited, particularly on online news portals. Election coverage was heavily skewed in favour of men candidates, especially party leaders, who dominated the media narrative when compared to their women counterparts.⁶¹ Even women placed at the top of electoral lists received significantly less media attention. Further, gender equality issues appeared in just over 2% of the monitored online articles, and women featured in only about 20% of

paid political advertisements, compared to men being featured in 80% of the paid advertisements, which were purchased by just four of the 11 monitored political parties. This media imbalance reflects broader obstacles to women's political participation and mirrors long-standing patterns in traditional media. Persistent patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, and online misogyny further contribute to both the marginalisation and hostile portrayal of women in politics. In addition, the lack of internal party support and failure to prioritise gender equality in media strategies, despite full control over their campaign messaging, continues to limit women's public visibility and electoral competitiveness.

Serbia

Women's political representation in Serbia shows signs of gradual improvement, yet it remains uneven across different branches of government. In the National Assembly, women currently hold 94 out of 250 seats, accounting for approximately 38% of all Members of Parliament compared to 62% men. This composition reflects the outcome of the early Parliamentary elections held on 17 December 2023. While this percentage is relatively high compared to the regional average, women continue to face significant challenges in accessing positions of executive power.

Out of 32 ministerial posts in the Government of Serbia, 8 are held by women, making up one-quarter of the cabinet. This is one of the highest rates of women's representation in executive government across the Western Balkans. Among them are Adrijana Mesarović (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy), Dubravka Đedović Handanović (Minister of Mining and Energy), Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski (Minister of Labour, Employment, Veterans, and Social Affairs), Jelena Žarić Kovačević (Minister for Family Care and Demography), Sara Pavkov (Minister of

Environmental Protection), Aleksandra Damjanović Sofornijević (Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure), Jagoda Lazarević (Minister of Internal and External Trade) and Snežana Paunović (Minister of Public Administration and Local Self-Government). While this signals institutional acknowledgment of gender issues, the overall gender imbalance in the executive branch still reflects persistent structural barriers to women's full political participation.

Despite the introduction of measures aimed at fostering more balanced political representation, women in Serbia remain underrepresented in political life. As noted in the European Commission's *Serbia 2024 Report*,⁶² the visibility of women candidates during the Parliamentary election campaign was significantly limited. When women did appear in the media or campaign materials, they were often portrayed in traditional and stereotypical roles, reinforcing existing gender norms rather than challenging them. Moreover, gender equality issues were largely absent from the political agenda, indicating a persistent lack of commitment by political actors to mainstream

60 Metamorphosis – Foundation for Internet and Society. 'Bridging the Gender Gap: Strengthening Women's Representation in Political Advertising and Coverage on Internet Portals', Metamorphosis – Foundation for Internet and Society, Skopje, 2024, <https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/gender-policy-document-final-03022025.pdf>, (accessed 24 October 2025).

61 *Ibid.*

62 European Commission, 'Serbia 2024 Report', European Commission – Enlargement, Brussels, European Commission, 2024, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia+Report+2024.pdf, (accessed 28 October 2025).

gender in electoral discourse. For example, in the exposition speech of the newly appointed Prime Minister Đuro Macuta given in Parliament in April 2025, he avoids the term “gender” and frames women in traditional roles as mothers and moral anchors, emphasising protection over political empowerment. While he speaks of equal rights, his focus is on safeguarding women, not placing them at the centre of political life, reinforcing a patriarchal view rather than genuine gender equality.⁶³ This marginalisation not only limits women’s political influence but also undermines broader democratic principles and the quality of public debate.

Although Serbia has made progress in closing the overall gender gap, ranking 26th out of

146 countries in the World Economic Forum’s 2024 *Global Gender Gap Index*, women remain significantly underrepresented in decision-making and career-related positions. While this marks an improvement from the previous report published in 2023, when Serbia ranked 38th, key areas such as political empowerment and leadership in the labour market continue to lag. Persistent gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms present ongoing barriers to women’s advancement, particularly in sectors where leadership and influence are concentrated, such as politics. The presence of women in high-level political, economic, and professional roles remains limited, revealing that formal progress in gender equality does not yet translate into substantial gains in power and representation.



New generation of feminist activists, 2025, North Macedonia;
Photographer: Maja Janevska Ilieva

63 HOBOTN, ‘Ceo ekspozije Đure Macuta: Pročitajte izlaganje kandidata za predsednika Vlade’, HOBOTN, 15 April 2025, <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1481407/ceo-ekspozije-djuro-macuta-procitajte-izlaganje-kandidata-predsednika-vlade>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

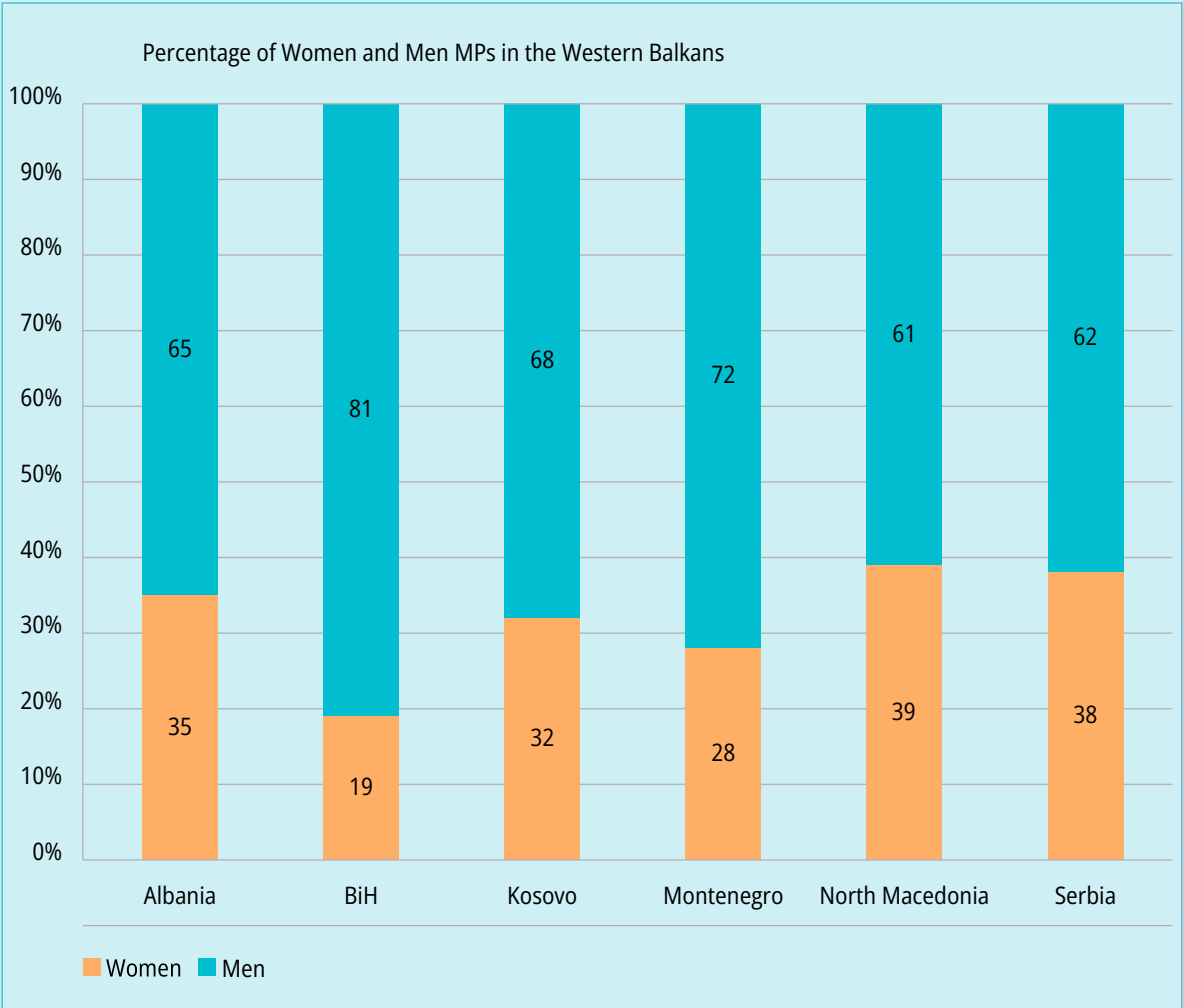
STATISTICAL DATA SHOWS:

Percentage of Women and Men in National Parliament, 2025

	Number of women	Number of men	Total number of seats	Percentage of women (%)	Percentage of men (%)
Albania	49	91	140	35%	65%
BiH ⁶⁴	11	46	57	19%	81%
Kosovo	39	81	120	32%	68%
Montenegro	23	58	81	28%	72%
North Macedonia	47	73	120	39%	61%
Serbia	94	156	250	38%	62%



Info: The average percentage of women MPs in the Western Balkans is approximately 32%, which represents an overall 4 percentage point decrease in the region compared to 2022 statistics where the average was 36%. Comparatively, the regional average of men MPs is 68%.



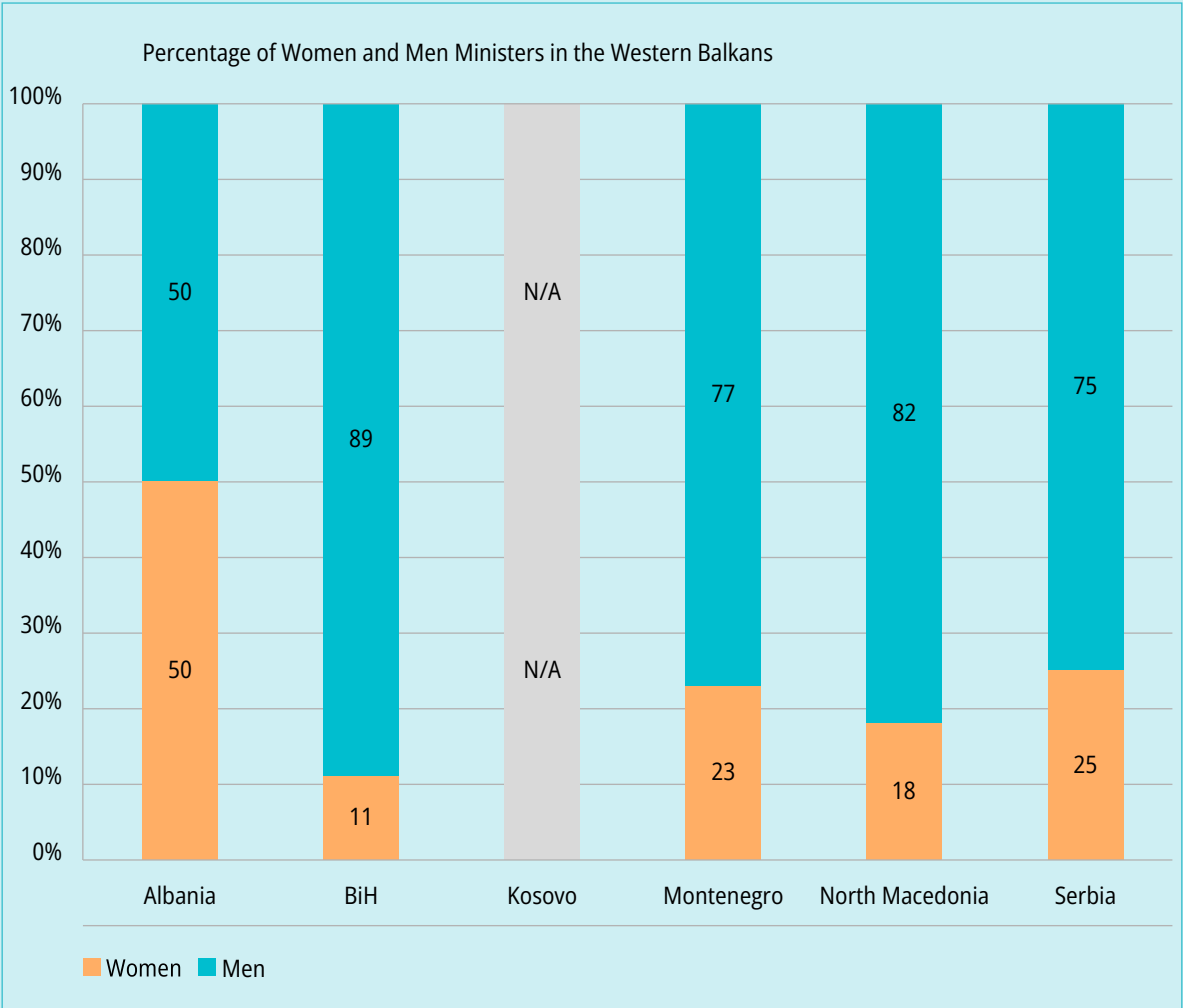
64 Numbers refer to representation of both the House of Representatives (10 women and 32 men) and the House of Peoples (1 women, 14 men).

Percentage of Women and Men Ministers, 2025

	Number of women	Number of men	Total number of seats	Percentage of women (%)	Percentage of men (%)
Albania	8	8	16	50%	50%
BiH	1	8	9	11%	89%
Kosovo ⁶⁵	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Montenegro	6	20	26	23%	77%
North Macedonia	3	14	17	18%	82%
Serbia	8	24	32	25%	75%



Info: The average percentage of women ministers is approximately 25%, compared to 34% in 2022. The regional average of men ministers is 66%. This represents an overall 9 percentage point increase of women ministers in the region compared to statistics from 2022.

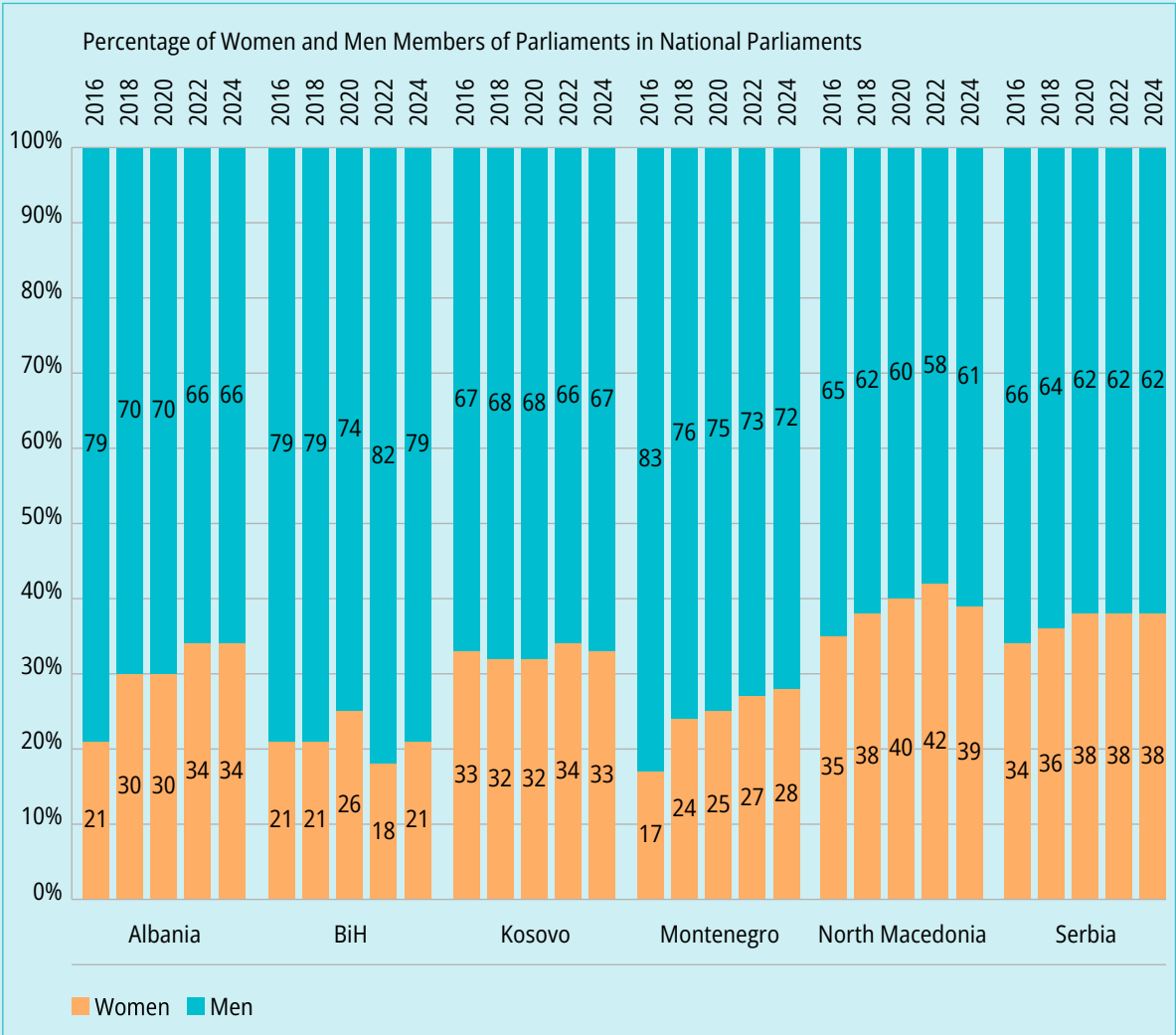


65 At the time of writing this report, Kosovo had not yet formed a Ministerial Cabinet following the 12 October 2025 elections.

COMPARISON TABLE:

Percentage of Women and Men Members of Parliaments in National Parliaments (2016–2025)

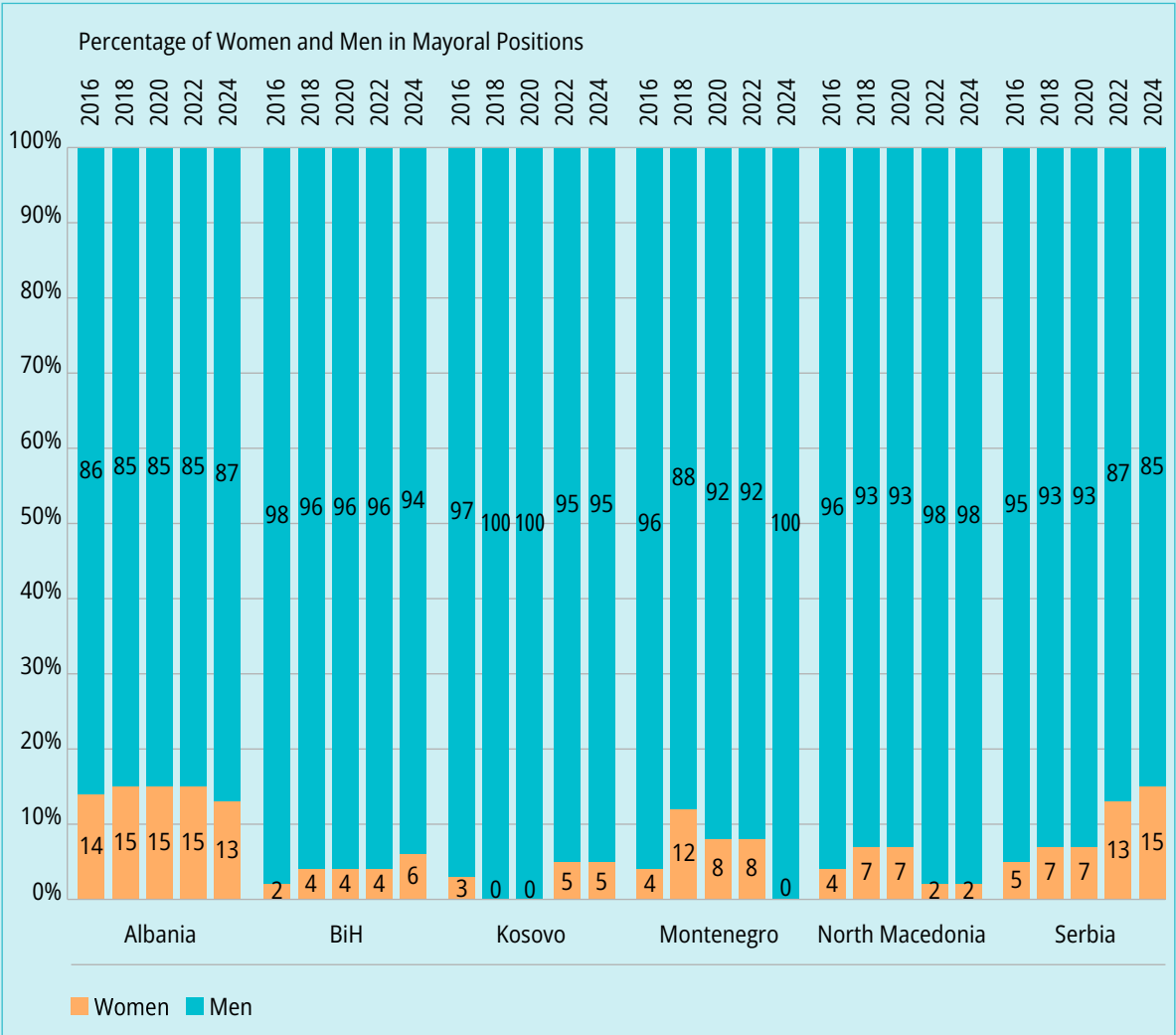
	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		2021		2022		2023		2024		2025	
	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M
Albania	21	79	30	70	30	70	30	70	30	70	34	66	34	66	34	66	34	66	35	65
BiH	21	79	21	79	21	79	21	79	26	74	18	82	18	82	21	79	21	79	19	81
Kosovo	33	67	32	68	32	68	32	68	32	68	34	66	34	66	34	66	33	67	32	68
Montenegro	17	83	24	76	24	76	23	77	25	75	27	73	27	73	28	72	28	72	28	72
North Macedonia	35	65	31	69	38	62	38	62	40	60	42	58	42	58	42	58	39	61	39	61
Serbia	34	66	34	66	36	64	37	63	38	62	38	62	38	62	38	62	38	62	38	62



COMPARISON TABLE:

Percentage of Women and Men Ministers (2016–2025)

	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		2021		2022		2023		2024		2025	
	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M
Albania	40	60	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	71	29	75	25	75	25	75	25	71	29
BiH	14	86	25	75	22	78	N/A	N/A	22	78	19	81	19	81	11	89	11	89	11	89
Kosovo	5	95	12	88	5	95	10	90	20	80	33	67	33	67	33	67	33	67	N/A	N/A
Montenegro	18	82	22	78	22	78	22	78	22	78	22	78	22	78	23	77	23	77	23	77
North Macedonia	10	90	15	85	18	82	22	78	25	75	16	84	16	84	16	84	18	82	18	82
Serbia	21	79	21	79	19	81	19	81	19	81	45	55	45	55	25	75	25	75	25	75



Representation of women in local/municipal councils

Women's participation in local governance across the Western Balkans, similar to participation in national governance, reflects a persistent structural imbalance. While gender quotas have significantly improved descriptive representation in municipal councils, women remain systematically excluded from executive power. This split highlights a critical distinction between presence and influence. Women are increasingly visible in deliberative roles but rarely hold decision-making authority.

All six Western Balkan countries have legislated gender quotas for municipal elections, aiming to increase women's representation in local governance. Albania is moving progressively toward full gender parity, with its quota increasing from 30% to 35%, and set to reach 50% after 2026, alongside a strict placement rule requiring one woman in every two candidates. BiH and Serbia both enforce a 40% quota for the less-represented gender, with placement rules that ensure balanced gender representation across party lists. Kosovo and Montenegro maintain a 30% quota, with Kosovo requiring one in every three candidates to be a woman and Montenegro

enforcing one in every four. North Macedonia applies a placement rule mandating one woman in every three candidates, effectively ensuring at least 33% representation. While these quotas have improved the numerical presence of women in local councils, none of the countries apply quotas to mayoral or executive positions where women remain critically under-represented. Over the years, the *Women's Rights in Western Balkans* report has continuously indicated how these gains remain fragile, dependent on enforcement mechanisms and party compliance. Moreover, quotas have proven largely ineffective in reshaping access to executive offices, where political capital, intra-party dynamics, and entrenched gender norms play a more decisive role. Across the region, the share of women in mayoral roles remains under 15% in most countries, and often much lower.

This disparity is further compounded by symbolic and participatory inequalities. Women councillors are not only fewer in number in some areas, but also participate less in deliberations, are interrupted while speaking more often, and face cultural and institutional barriers that limit their



Women Human Rights Defenders at the Brussels Advocacy Week 2025, Brussels, Belgium; Photographer: Johanna de Tessieres

influence. In several cases, even where women are present, their role is often reduced to symbolic representation rather than active leadership.

Another recurring trend witnessed over the years is the disconnection between legal frameworks and actual political practice. Most countries formally uphold commitments to gender equality (through national legislation and international instruments like the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), yet enforcement is weak. Institutional resistance, underfunded mechanisms for equality,

and men-dominated party structures continue to inhibit progress for women's representation at the municipal government level.

Finally, public perception and media representation, especially during local elections, reinforce these obstacles. Women in politics are often depicted through gendered lenses, emphasising traits like empathy and honesty, while associating leadership and strategy with men. This not only affects voter behaviour but also discourages women from seeking higher office, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion.

Albania

Women's political representation in local government in Albania reveals a mixed picture of progress and persistent disparity. Following the May 2023 local elections, only 8 out of 61 mayors are women, representing just 13% of women within all mayoral positions compared to 87% of men. This low percentage underscores the ongoing challenges women face in accessing executive roles and highlights the need for more targeted efforts to promote women's leadership at the highest local levels.

In contrast, progress has been more visible in representative bodies. Women now hold approximately 43% of the 1,613 municipal council seats across Albania's 61 municipalities, a significant improvement from previous election cycles. This positive shift is largely the result of the 50% gender quota mandated by the Electoral Code, which has enhanced women's presence in local decision-making. Despite remaining gaps, these numbers reflect a step forward in achieving more gender-balanced local governance.

This broad political representation in municipal councils has contributed to a more pluralistic

and hopeful democratic atmosphere at the local level.⁶⁶ Citizens perceived this diversity as a sign of institutional responsiveness and renewal. However, such pluralism did not extend to the election of mayors, where the political status quo remained largely intact and no significant shifts in power occurred. Similarly, the composition of regional councils failed to reflect the political preferences of voters, instead mirroring the will of the ruling majority, highlighting ongoing limitations in translating electoral diversity into executive and regional leadership. Yet, this picture of pluralism and diversity becomes more problematic when viewed through an intersectional lens. The participation of underrepresented groups, such as Roma and Egyptian communities, persons with disabilities, youth, and the LGBTIQ+ community, remains systematically constrained by entrenched social prejudices, structural inequities, and the absence of targeted political mechanisms for inclusion. As outlined in the Albanian Women Empowerment Network (AWEN) Analytic Report,⁶⁷ the barriers faced by these groups highlight the gap between formal opportunities for participation and the reality of exclusion from meaningful political representation.

66 Haxhimali, A., 'Local government in Albania: status report 2023', Institute for Albanian Municipalities – IAM, Tirana, 2024, <https://iam.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Local-Government-in-Albania-Status-Report-2023.pdf>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

67 Albanian Women Empowerment Network – AWEN, 'Analytic report: Political representation and participation of underrepresented groups in the electoral process', Albanian Women Empowerment Network – AWEN, Tirana, 2023, <https://awenetwork.org/eng/publikime/reports/analytic-report-political-representation-and-participation-of-underrep>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

An analysis of municipal council meetings in 2023, conducted by the Albanian Women's Empowerment Network,⁶⁸ reveals a deeper imbalance: women councillors spoke in only about 26% of all recorded interventions, compared to 74% by men. This marks a decrease from 2018, when women accounted for 34% of speaking time, compared to men that occupied 66% of the speaking time. Moreover, women were interrupted while speaking more than twice as often as men, 21% of the time versus 8%, indicating persistent

structural and cultural barriers to women's full and equal participation in political deliberation.

One example of efforts to support women's political engagement at the local level is the OSCE's Women Municipal Excellence Programme,⁶⁹ which offers targeted training to strengthen the role of women councillors. While such initiatives are encouraging, sustained institutional and political commitment remains essential to ensure meaningful and lasting change.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Women remain starkly underrepresented in executive positions within local government in BiH. Out of 142 elected mayoral roles across the country, only eight are held by women, accounting for approximately 6%, compared to 94% held by men. This glaring disparity highlights the persistent exclusion of women from the highest levels of local decision-making and the enduring gender gap in political power.

The situation is somewhat more balanced within municipal councils, where women hold around 728 of the 3,200 seats, representing approximately 23% of women councillors, compared to 77% of men councillors. While this marks a modest improvement compared to mayoral representation, it still falls short of gender parity. These figures point to a political landscape where women's participation is largely confined to representative rather than executive roles, suggesting the need for stronger institutional mechanisms and political will to advance gender equality in local governance.

According to the ODIHR *Election Observation Mission Final Report 2024*,⁷⁰ women's political

participation in BiH's local elections remained alarmingly low, despite formal commitments to gender equality and existing legal quotas. Although women made up 42% of all candidates, compared to 58% of men, only 8% of mayoral candidates were women (29 out of 386), compared to 92% of men candidates (356 out of 386), and just eight women were ultimately elected as mayors. These numbers reflect the ongoing structural barriers to women's political empowerment, including limited enforcement of gender quota requirements in both candidate lists and election commissions. Notably, several party lists failed to meet the legally mandated 40% threshold for the less-represented gender, and even institutions such as the Central and Municipal Election Commissions did not consistently uphold gender balance within their own composition.

Moreover, the electoral campaign environment continued to marginalise women politicians or those entering decision-making positions in the political sphere. The amendments to the Election Law imposed by the High Representative on 26 March 2024 aimed to enhance the visibility

68 Albanian Women Empowerment Network – AWEN, 'Përfaqësimi politik në këshillat bashkiake pas zbatimit të kuotës gjinore 50/50: çfarë po ndodh me hendekun gjinor?', Smart Balkans Project, 2024, <https://smartbalkansproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/67599797d34a6.pdf>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

69 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE, 'OSCE Presence in Albania empowers newly-elected women councillors in Vlorë, Shkodra and Tirana through Women Municipal Excellence Programme', Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE, 14 December 2023, <https://www.osce.org/presence-in-albania/560481#:~:text=Democratization%2C%20Gender%20equality-,OSCE%20Presence%20in%20Albania%20empowers%20newly%20elected%20women%20councillors%20in,through%20Women%20Municipal%20Excellence%20Programme>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

70 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE, 'Bosnia and Herzegovina – Local Elections, 6 October 2026: ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report', Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE, Warsaw, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights – ODIHR, 2025, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/3/586134.pdf>, (accessed 24 October 2025).

of women candidates by introducing gender-balanced media obligations and structural gender provisions, including within election commissions. However, these measures had little practical effect, as women remained underrepresented in campaign events and faced frequent gender-specific attacks and misogynistic language. Recommendations submitted by ODIHR and the Venice Commission for a system

ensuring minimum gender representation in elected bodies remain unaddressed in the reporting period, and transparency remains limited, as decisions on election complaints are still not publicly accessible. Overall, the elections reaffirmed that legal frameworks alone are insufficient to ensure gender parity without robust enforcement and institutional commitment to substantive equality.

Kosovo

Women's political participation in local government and at the municipal level in Kosovo remains significantly limited, particularly in executive leadership positions. Following the 2021 local elections, out of a total of 38 mayoral positions across the country, only two are held by women, with both elected officials representing Srpska Lista (translation: Serbian List). This amounts to just 5% of women's representation among mayors, the lowest in the region.

In contrast, representation in municipal councils is relatively higher but still falls short of parity. Of the 1,020 council members elected in 2021, 364 are women, constituting approximately 36%, compared to 64% of men councillors. While this reflects some progress in gender inclusion within deliberative bodies, the persistent underrepresentation of women in top decision-making roles highlights ongoing structural and political barriers to gender equality in local governance.

Women's representation at the local level continues to fall short of the standards set by the Law on Gender Equality and the CEDAW.⁷¹ Following the 2017 municipal elections and prior

to the 2021 municipal elections, there were no mayoral position in Kosovo held by women, underscoring the persistent difficulty for women to access executive roles.⁷² In the 2021 election cycle, 14 women ran for mayor, accounting for only 8% of all mayoral candidates. Women made up 37% of the candidates for municipal assembly positions (compared to 63% men candidates) and led 12% of political entity lists (compared to 88% men).⁷³ Notably, 61% of the women who secured seats in municipal assemblies were elected through votes received rather than the gender quota mechanism, a marked improvement from 2017 when only 33% of elected women achieved their positions independently of the quota, and 67% were elected because of the gender quota.⁷⁴

Representation in appointed leadership positions, such as municipal directors, deputy mayors, and speakers, has also shown gradual improvement. From a consistent 7% in 2007 (compared to 93% for men) by 2023 it reached approximately 26% (compared to 73% for men). Despite this positive trend, Kosovo still falls short of its legal obligations to ensure at least 30% or 50% gender representation in public office.⁷⁵ Moreover, two

71 UN Women, 'Kosovo Gender Country Profile', EEAS, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/UNWOMEN_GEF_ENG.pdf, (accessed 28 October 2025).

72 Farnsworth, N., et al., 'Kosovo Gender Analysis', Kosovo Women's Network, 2018, <https://womensnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/womens-network.pdf>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

73 UN Women, 'Kosovo Gender Country Profile', EEAS, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/UNWOMEN_GEF_ENG.pdf, (accessed 28 October 2025).

74 EU Election Observation Mission in Kosovo, 'EU EOM Kosovo – 2021 Municipal Elections: Final Report', EEAS, 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/final_report_2021_eom_kosovo_municipal_elections_-_english.pdf, (accessed 28 October 2025).

75 Shala, S., Robaj, A., and Musa, E., 'Critical Analysis of Kosovo Legislation on Women's Political Participation at the Municipal Level – International and European Standards', *Krytyka Prawa*, tom. 15, no. 2, 2023, p. 135–156, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372841720_Critical_Analysis_of_Kosovo_Legislation_on_Women%27s_Political_Participation_at_the_Municipal_Level_-_International_and_European_Standards, (accessed 30 October 2025).

out of 38 municipalities failed to appoint any women directors, and in 12 cases, data on director appointments was missing, indicating persistent structural and data transparency gaps.

Despite gradual improvements in women's representation in local governance, significant barriers continue to hinder gender equality in Kosovo's political life. This underrepresentation stands in stark contrast to the active electoral participation of women, who make up half of the voting population. The gap between women as voters and women as elected leaders reflects deeper structural and cultural challenges.⁷⁶ Key factors contributing to this inequality include persistent gender stereotypes among party leaders and voters, limited support from political parties, and the perception that men are

more capable of holding public office.⁷⁷ These issues are compounded by traditional gender roles and cultural norms that restrict women's political participation, particularly at the local level. Much of these factors and challenges are disproportionately faced by women and women candidates than their men counterparts.

Financial and media support are also lacking. Compared to men candidates, women candidates often receive minimal funding from parties and families, and their presence in media during campaigns is limited.⁷⁸ These factors, combined with broader social and cultural constraints, contribute to the ongoing gender gap in local governance. Addressing these issues requires not only legal measures, but also cultural change and targeted support for women in politics.

Montenegro

In Montenegro, the gender imbalance in local executive leadership is striking. Following the most recent local elections, all 25 mayoral positions are now held by men, meaning that at the time of writing this report, there were no women mayors in the country. This marks a regression from previous mandates when a small number of women did hold these roles. This complete absence of women's representation in such key decision-making positions underscores the persistence and, in this case, the worsening of gender inequality in local governance. This total absence of women at the highest municipal level reflects deep-rooted barriers to women's political leadership, including persistent patriarchal norms and limited support for women candidates.

While women hold approximately 33% of municipal council seats, suggesting some level

of participation in local legislative bodies, the disparity between council representation and executive roles points to a glass ceiling that remains firmly in place.

Alongside the structural barriers women face in accessing political power in Montenegro, evident in the complete absence of women mayors and limited presence in decision-making roles, public perception reveals another level of challenges for advancing gender equality in politics. Literature⁷⁹ indicates that Montenegrin citizens more frequently associate women in politics with personal qualities such as charisma (approximately 32% of respondents), empathy (approximately 31%), honesty (approximately 27%), and responsibility (approximately 20%), all of which are traits deemed essential for ethical and inclusive democratic governance. However, when

76 Momčinović, P., 'Here to stay – political participation of women in the Western Balkan, Perspectives – Political Analysis and Commentary, 2020, 8, pp. 51–55, https://ba.boell.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/perspectives%20-%2009-2020%20-%20web_1.pdf, (accessed 30 October 2025).

77 Peci, L., 'Policy and Decision-making in Political Parties in Kosovo: Women, Youth and Ethnic Communities', Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Research Paper No. 3/15, 2015, https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?groupId=252038&uuiid=397a8c53-83cb-6195-a41c-84463d57c8d8&utm_source, (accessed 30 October 2025).

78 Shala, S., Robaj, A., and Musa, E., 'Critical Analysis of Kosovo Legislation on Women's Political Participation at the Municipal Level – International and European Standards', Krytyka Prawa, tom. 15, no. 2, 2023, p. 135–156, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372841720_Critical_Analysis_of_Kosovo_Legislation_on_Women%27s_Political_Participation_at_the_Municipal_Level_-_International_and_European_Standards, (accessed 30 October 2025).

79 DeFacto Consultancy, 'Nasilje nad ženama u politici', Westminster Foundation for Democracy – WFD, Podgorica, 2024, <https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/WFD%20Publication%20MNE.pdf>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

it comes to characteristics more directly linked to political authority and influence, such as leadership (48% of respondents), integrity (approximately 37%), self-confidence (35%), diplomacy (35%), and strategic thinking (approximately 34%), these are disproportionately attributed to men. This division reveals an underlying perception that Montenegrin politics remains a space where „masculine“ traits are prioritised and rewarded, reinforcing gendered norms about who is seen

as naturally suited for political leadership. While citizens may value the ethical qualities women bring, the continued framing of politics as an arena for strategic dominance and control works to marginalise women and justify their exclusion from positions of power. This underscores the need for targeted advocacy that not only supports women's candidacies but also challenges the very assumptions about what makes a „good“ political leader.

North Macedonia

Despite progressive legislative frameworks aimed at ensuring gender-balanced political representation, women's participation in local executive positions in North Macedonia remains critically low. Following the 2021 local elections, out of 81 elected mayors, only two were women. This striking underrepresentation reflects the persistent barriers women face in accessing decision-making positions at the municipal level.

In contrast to the aforementioned 2.5% of women as mayors, women's presence in municipal councils was notably higher, with approximately 37% of seats held by women. This improvement can be largely attributed to the Electoral Code, which mandates that at least 40% of candidates on party lists must come from the underrepresented gender, along with placement rules designed to prevent tokenism.⁸⁰ However, the disparity between legislative intent and actual election outcomes highlights the limitations of quota systems when not paired with strong political will and structural support for women candidates.⁸¹ Namely, quotas help ensure women are nominated, but they do not guarantee their election, especially to executive positions, without complementary measures. These include internal party commitment to promoting women, addressing voter bias, providing resources for women's campaigns, and challenging persistent gender norms. Without such structural and

cultural support, quotas risk becoming a formal obligation with limited transformative impact.

CSO Reactor has examined women's representation in municipal councils in North Macedonia,⁸² finding that women's representation is still driven more by formal quota compliance than by genuine political inclusion. Parties often place women candidates in lower, non-winning positions on electoral lists, meeting the legal minimum while limiting their chances of election. Campaign visibility is also gendered, in that women appear less in public debates and media coverage due to party strategies that prioritise men candidates and the persistence of societal stereotypes about political leadership. Even when elected, women councillors rarely hold key decision-making positions within councils, reflecting patriarchal norms within party structures and local governance. As a result, numerical representation has not translated into substantive influence or gender-sensitive policymaking at the local level.

Although North Macedonia has met the formal gender quotas in its legislative and judicial branches, women remain significantly underrepresented in executive positions at both national and local levels. This persistent gap reflects deeper structural inequalities in the country's political landscape. As this report illustrates, gender

80 UN Women, 'Country Gender Equality Profile of North Macedonia', UN Women Europe and Central Asia, 2023, https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/unw_cgep_nmk_eng_web.pdf, (accessed 28 October 2025).

81 Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje (IDSCS), 'Participation of community women in political and public life in North Macedonia', Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE, OSCE Mission to Skopje, Skopje, 2024, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/1/581440.pdf>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

82 Reactor – Research in Action, 'Women in Politics 2: Path to Public Office and Impact at the Local Level in North Macedonia', Reactor – Research in Action, Skopje, 2023, <https://reactor.org.mk/en/publication-all/women-in-politics-2-path-to-public-office-and-impact-at-the-local-level-in-north-macedonia/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

disparities in governance, decision-making, and public life are still entrenched. The 2023 Gender Equality Profile of North Macedonia⁸³ identifies the root causes of this imbalance in the internal dynamics of political parties. Women are rarely entrusted with leadership roles, and political parties frequently operate without adequate frameworks to support and protect their women members, candidates, and elected officials. In many cases, there are no clear mechanisms to address discrimination, harassment, or GBV within party structures, leaving women exposed and unsupported in their political engagement. This lack of institutional protection not only hinders women's advancement but also discourages broader participation in public and political life.

The limited participation of women in public life in North Macedonia is closely tied to deeply rooted patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles. According to a 2018 UN Women study on public perceptions of gender equality,⁸⁴ public spaces and decision-making arenas are largely male dominated, while women are still primarily seen as responsible for caregiving and domestic duties. This societal expectation is present across the country but is particularly pronounced among Roma and Albanian communities for whom the expectation is even higher compared to the majority Macedonian population.

A 2024 OSCE study on women's political and public participation⁸⁵ highlights that 72% of women have no direct involvement in politics and lack personal ambition to engage. The dominant reason cited for this is a general lack of interest, a sentiment echoed by interviewed politicians who acknowledged this reluctance and described the political arena as "dirty" especially for women. However, among women who are active or aspire to become politically engaged, the main drivers are a strong desire to influence change and contribute to societal improvement. At the same time, many women report low confidence in their skills and knowledge as barriers to pursuing higher political roles. The role they feel most qualified for is that of municipal councillor, suggesting a perception that local-level engagement is more accessible and achievable.⁸⁶

Yet even when women move beyond local-level roles to occupy high-profile leadership positions, they often face intensified scrutiny, hostility, and threats. The experience of Danela Arsovska, Mayor of Skopje, offers a stark example of the risks and GBV that can accompany women's political leadership. Arsovska became a central figure in efforts to tackle illegal construction in the city, particularly in the municipality of Čair. Her actions made her the target of escalating hostility, including sexist verbal harassment, xenophobic abuse related to her Bulgarian citizenship, and repeated death threats. In the weeks preceding July 2025, Arsovska requested formal protection from the government due to the severity of threats but was denied. This institutional failure left her exposed despite clear signs of danger. On 11 July 2025, while leading an inspection of illegal construction in Čair, Arsovska was physically attacked in broad daylight. The attacker punched and kicked her in the presence of police officers and issued explicit, gender-based verbal threats: he threatened to rape her and all her family members. While some men politicians in North Macedonia have experienced physical violence, they have not been subjected to rape threats that weaponise gender and sexual violence. The violence she endured was both physical and gendered, aimed at intimidating her as a woman in public office. In the aftermath, the Minister of Interior attempted to publicly downplay the event. In a televised interview, he sought to shift blame onto Arsovska herself, suggesting she had initiated the attack, despite video evidence showing otherwise. The assailants were later arrested, and the court issued convictions, marking a rare instance of accountability in cases of violence against women politicians. While the convictions are significant, the case nevertheless underscores systemic failures. Arsovska was left unprotected until after the attack, and institutional responses continued to minimise the gendered nature of the violence she faced. Her experience reveals the intersection of corruption, ethnic tension, misogyny, and weak rule of law, raising serious concerns about the safety of women public officials who challenge entrenched interests.

83 UN Women, 'Country Gender Equality Profile of North Macedonia', UN Women Europe and Central Asia, 2023, https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/unw_cgep_nmk_eng_web.pdf, (accessed 28 October 2025).

84 UN Women, '2018 Public perceptions of gender equality and violence against women – Republic of North Macedonia', UN Women Europe and Central Asia, 2018, <https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ECA/Attachments/Publications/2019/05/North%20Macedonia-2b.pdf>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

85 Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje (IDSCS), 'Participation of community women in political and public life in North Macedonia', Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE, OSCE Mission to Skopje, Skopje, 2024, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/1/581440.pdf>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

86 *Ibid.*

Serbia

In Serbia, women's representation in local governance remains shaped by both progress and persistent gaps. Out of 145 mayoral positions, only 22 are held by women (123 mayoral positions are held by men), which equates to just 15% (85% for men) indicating a significant gender imbalance in executive leadership at the local level. In contrast, women currently occupy approximately 38% of the seats in municipal councils, reflecting a somewhat stronger presence in deliberative roles.

This difference in representation can partly be attributed to the country's gender quota system, which requires at least 40% of candidates on electoral lists to be from the underrepresented gender. While this measure has facilitated more equitable participation in local councils, it has not yet translated into higher rates of women in decision-making leadership roles, such as mayors. These figures underscore the importance of not only maintaining but also reinforcing institutional mechanisms and support systems that encourage and enable women to engage in politics at all levels of local government.

Several structural and cultural barriers continue to hinder women's full political participation.⁸⁷ Women often lack access to the essential resources, such as capital, information, and internal party networks, that would allow them to compete effectively within political parties, where voting and candidate selection are heavily influenced by male leadership. Moreover, widespread corruption, sexism, harassment, and the threat of violence in public and political spaces further deter women from entering the political sphere. These challenges are even more pronounced for women from marginalised groups,

including Roma, ethnic minorities, women with disabilities, women from rural communities, and LGBTQI+ individuals, who remain severely underrepresented in all levels of government and decision-making. There is also a general lack of political interest and confidence among youth, signalling a broader disengagement that could affect future gender equality in political leadership.

Further, significant structural and cultural barriers continue to undermine women's meaningful participation, especially at the local level. Various forms of violence, both structural and interpersonal, are a persistent feature of women's political careers.⁸⁸ Women face a range of obstacles, from centralised and male-dominated party structures that limit access to leadership positions, to deeply rooted authoritarian cultures that assign them to supportive, rather than decision-making, roles.

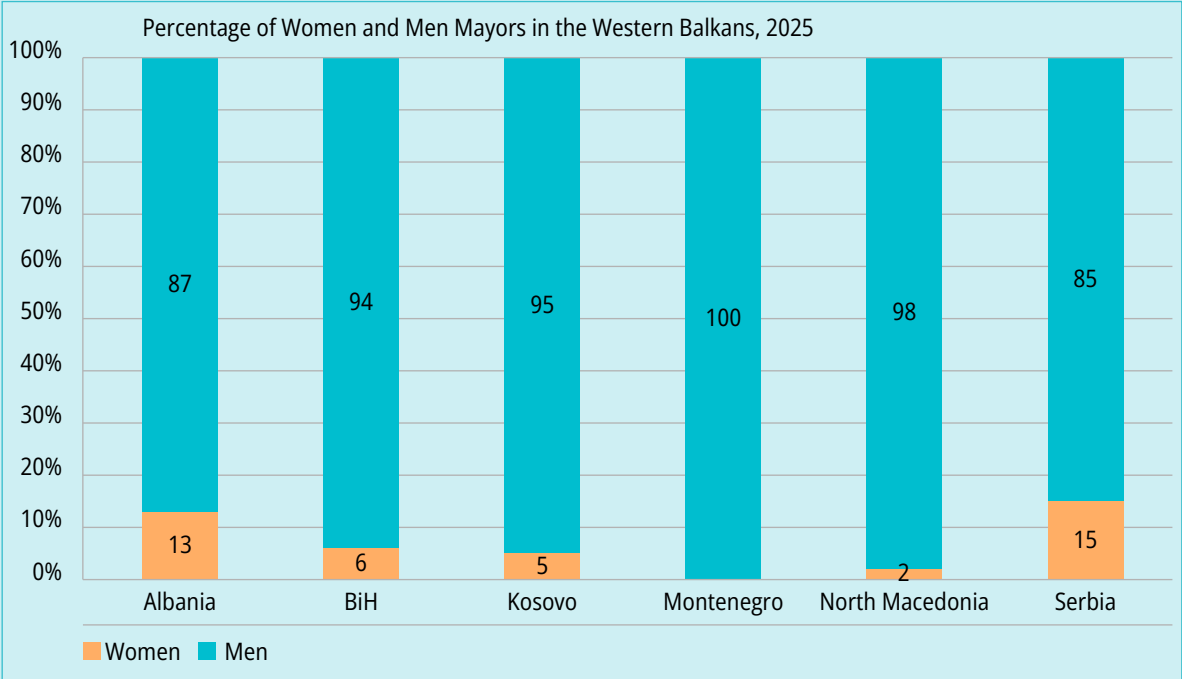
These dynamics are compounded by gender-based inequalities in access to political networks, economic resources, and internal party influence, factors that are crucial for political advancement. The interplay of gender with other forms of exclusion, such as territorial or clientelist affiliations, further diminishes women's chances of securing powerful posts. The OSCE report also notes the marginalisation of women politicians in media coverage, particularly those operating at the local and provincial levels. Meanwhile, mechanisms meant to support women's political empowerment, such as the Women's Parliamentary Network, often fall short due to party loyalty and blind partisanship taking precedence over gender solidarity.

87 Oliver-Burgess, A., et al., 'USAID/Serbia Final Gender Analysis Report', Banyan Global, Washington, 2020, <https://banyanglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/USAID-Serbia-Final-Gender-Analysis-Report.pdf>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

88 Babović, M., et al., 'Gender-based violence against women politicians in Serbia', OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights – ODIHR, OSCE Mission to Serbia, Belgrade, 2021, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/2/500611_0.pdf, (accessed 28 October 2025).

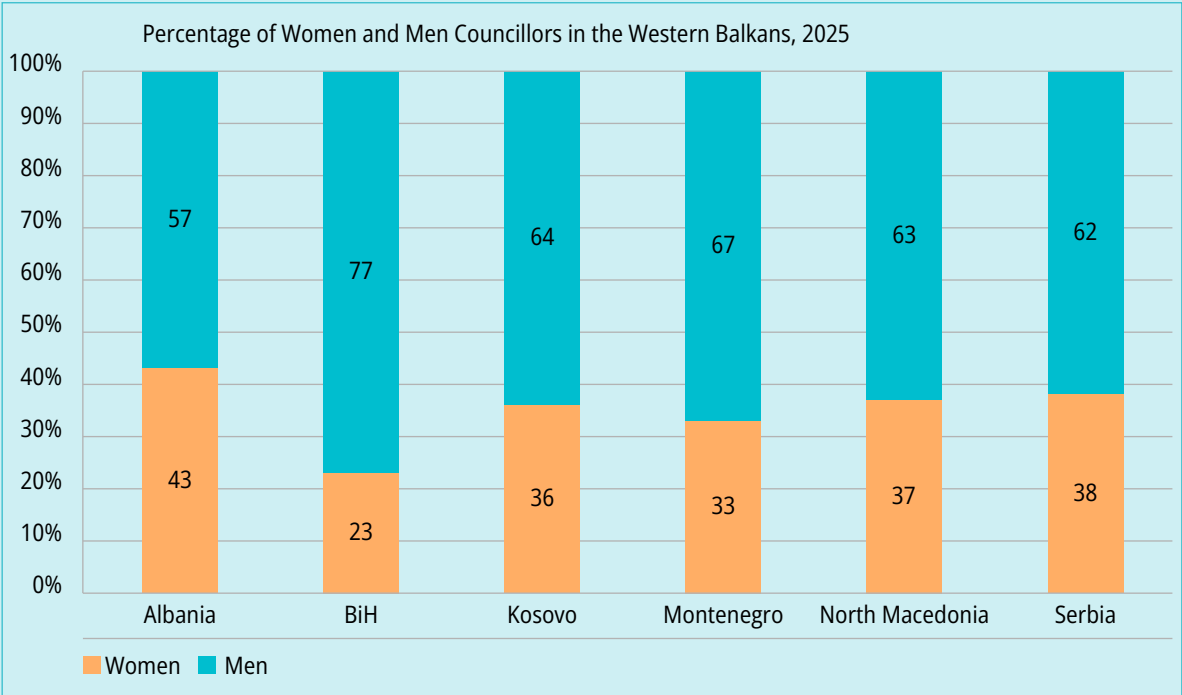
STATISTICAL DATA SHOWS:

Percentage of Women and Men Mayors 2025



Info: The average percentage of women mayors in the Western Balkans is alarmingly low, averaging approximately 7%. The average percentage of women mayors in 2022 was 8%.

Percentage of Women and Men Councillors in the Western Balkans, 2025



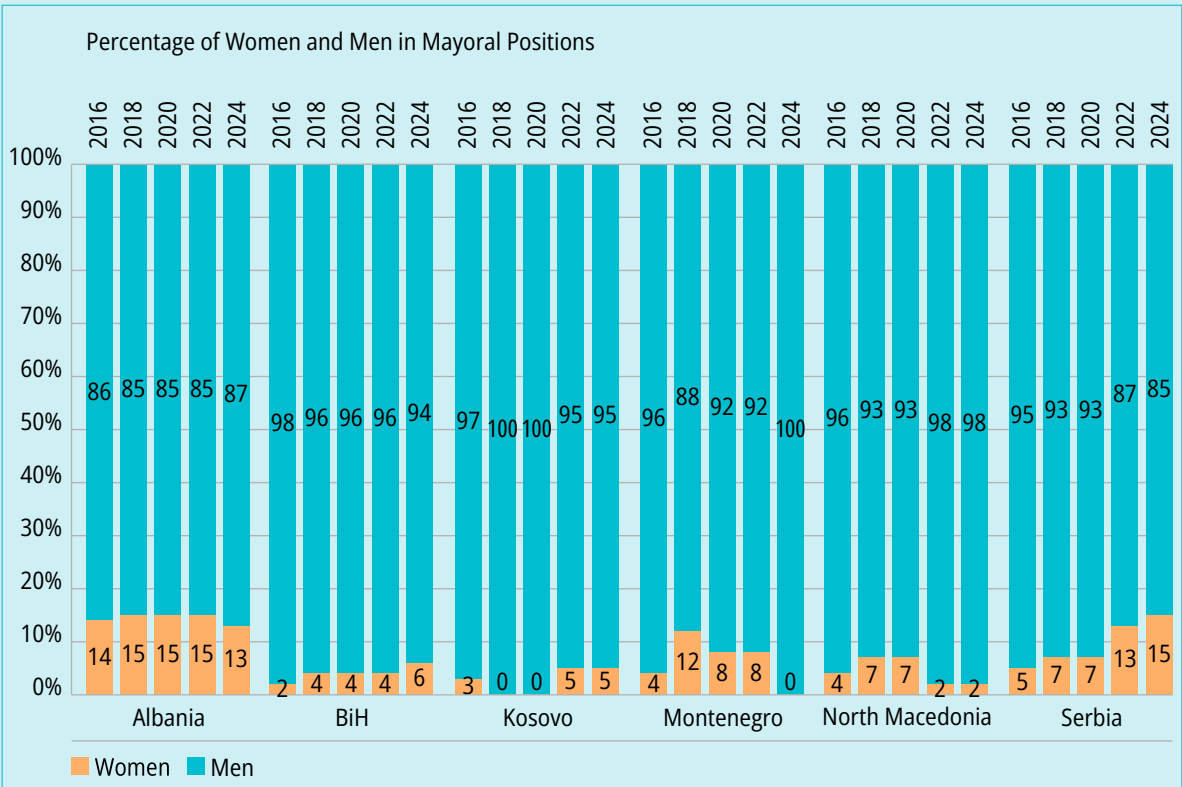
COMPARISON TABLE:

Percentage of Women and Men in Mayoral Positions (2016–2025)

	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		2021		2022		2023		2024		2025	
	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M
Albania	14	86	14	86	15	85	15	85	15	85	15	85	15	85	15	85	13	87	13	87
BiH	2	98	2	98	4	96	4	96	4	96	4	96	4	96	4	96	6	94	6	94
Kosovo	3	97	3	97	0	100	0	100	0	100	5	95	5	95	5	95	5	95	5	95
Montenegro	4	96	4	96	12	88	8	92	8	92	8	92	8	92	8	92	0	100	0	100
North Macedonia	4	96	4	96	7	93	7	83	7	83	2	98	2	98	2	98	2	98	2	98
Serbia	5	95	5	95	7	93	7	83	7	83	13	87	13	87	13	87	15	85	15	85



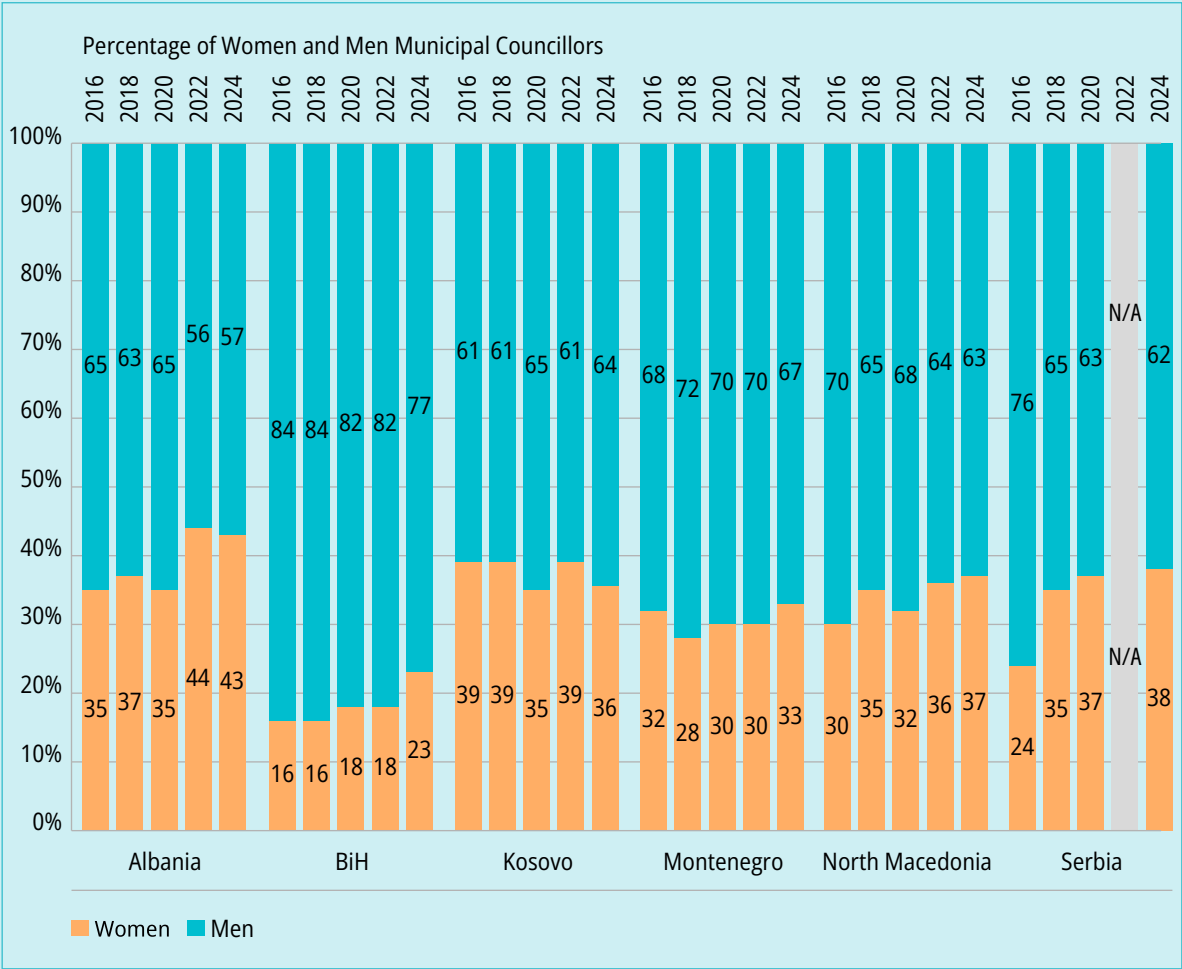
There are no major changes in the number of women in mayoral positions in the Western Balkans compared to 2022. Women’s representation in elected mayoral positions remains low across the region, ranging from 0 women (in Montenegro) to 15 (in Serbia).



COMPARISON TABLE:

Percentage of Women and Men Municipal Councillors (2016–2025)

	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		2021		2022		2023		2024		2025	
	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M
Albania	35	65	35	65	37	63	35	65	35	65	44	56	44	56	43	57	43	57	43	57
BiH	16	84	16	84	16	84	4	96	18	82	18	82	18	82	18	82	23	77	23	77
Kosovo	39	61	39	61	39	61	35	65	35	65	39	61	39	61	36	64	36	64	36	64
Montenegro	32	68	32	68	28	72	28	72	30	70	30	70	30	70	30	70	33	67	33	67
North Macedonia	30	70	30	70	35	65	33	67	32	68	36	64	36	64	37	63	37	63	37	63
Serbia	24	76	24	76	35	65	35	65	37	63	37	63	N/A ⁸⁹	N/A	37	63	38	62	38	62



89 N/A: All fields marked with N/A identify data that has been impossible to retrieve, access, or does not exist at this moment in time. Although elections in Serbia were held in 2022 in 14 municipalities, the gender disaggregated data for election results in these municipalities were not accessible to researchers.

In Focus: Trends over time for women in politics in the Western Balkans

An examination of the longitudinal data from *Women's Rights in Western Balkans* editions from 2016 to 2025 reveals that women's political participation in the Western Balkans continues to be shaped by a complex interplay of institutional reforms, gender quotas, and enduring patriarchal norms. This nine-year overview shows that, while there are pockets of progress, particularly in parliamentary and municipal council representation, these gains remain fragile and uneven, and they have not translated into women's equal access to executive decision-making positions.

At the national parliamentary levels, incremental improvements are evident. Albania's leap from 21% women MPs in 2016 to 35% in 2025 exemplifies the potential of gender quota laws when accompanied by some political will. North Macedonia and Serbia have maintained stable representation levels above one-third (an average of 38–39% by 2025), while Kosovo has hovered around 32–34% throughout that same time period. However, in BiH and Montenegro, the stagnation over time is striking. BiH remains around 21% and Montenegro only reached 28% by 2025, underscoring that legal mechanisms alone are insufficient where political cultures remain resistant.

Yet despite these numerical gains, this increased representation has failed to produce meaningful progress in advancing gender equality through legislation and policy. In fact, the opposite trend is increasingly evident: we are witnessing an active backlash within parliaments themselves, where laws that once promoted gender equality are being diluted or reversed. In North Macedonia, for example, references to gender equality were deliberately erased from education laws, while across the region, political discourse has become saturated with anti-gender rhetoric that frames gender equality itself as a threat to national identity and traditional values. These developments reveal that mere presence in parliament does not equate to power or influence; without a genuine transformation of political culture, women's increased numbers have done little to shift agendas, challenge patriarchal norms, or drive forward reforms that would improve the lives of women and marginalised groups.

Further, executive representation reveals deeper structural barriers. While Albania presents an exceptional case with women constituting 50% of ministers in 2025, other countries lag far behind. Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro remain around 18–25% women ministers, and BiH fell to 11% in 2025. The exclusion is even more pronounced at the local executive level: by 2025, women hold between 0 to 15% of mayoral positions across the region, with no significant improvement over the past decade.

This pattern of stalled progress and limited breakthrough reflects more than institutional inertia; it reveals the persistent influence of patriarchal social structures that view leadership, particularly executive authority, as inherently male domains. While gender quotas have helped improve descriptive representation in parliaments and councils, where women are more easily included symbolically, they have failed to transform the gendered hierarchies that reserve real political power for men.

Moreover, this period must be viewed within a broader context of cultural re-traditionalisation, where traditional gender norms are actively glamourised and promoted, both through political discourse and popular culture. The proliferation of anti-gender movements has reinforced conservative attitudes that discourage women's leadership and portray women in politics as negatively rather than positively transgressing societal expectations. These cultural currents amplify structural barriers, legitimising men's dominance in decision-making spheres and sustaining widespread scepticism toward women's political competence.

Importantly, this stagnation must also be understood historically. Under socialism, the Western Balkans were in many ways, ahead of the curve during the 20th century, with relatively progressive policies on gender equality, early enfranchisement, and high rates of women's participation in both public life and the labour market. However, that progress was never fully institutionalised or embedded into the political culture. With the post-socialist transition, the region effectively skipped a cycle of deeper gender equality consolidation, and instead, patriarchal

values resurfaced and were gradually rebuilt and normalised as part of the political and social “common sense.” What we see today is therefore not simply the effect of a recent conservative turn but a continuation of a longer historical trajectory in which gender equality gains were fragile, easily reversed, and never fully embraced at the structural and cultural level.

In many countries of the region, these cultural narratives have become increasingly mainstream, affecting both voter behaviour and party candidate selection processes. While women are often visible in political spaces as parliamentary deputies or councillors, a space perceived as “more acceptable” or “softer”, they remain largely excluded from the peak of political power where key decisions are made.

The trends suggest that without deeper cultural transformation and policies addressing structural discrimination, the quantitative gains in women's political participation will plateau or

even regress, as seen in some executive-level indicators. That means that the current number of women in elected positions, at both the national and local levels, is not guaranteed and is at-risk of being reduced. A narrow focus on meeting numerical targets cannot compensate for the lack of gender-sensitive institutional cultures and the growing social backlash against gender equality itself.

The longitudinal data, therefore, serves as a warning: despite progress in formal representation of women in decision-making positions, patriarchal values continue to define the limits of women's participation by reinforcing both historical traditions and gender hierarchies, under the guise of preserving national identity and social order. Moreover, the Western Balkans' trajectory today increasingly mirrors global patterns, suggesting that what was once perceived as a regional lag is now part of a broader, transnational struggle over the very meaning of gender equality in democratic societies.

Recommendations*

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS

IN BRIEF:

Political parity between women and men has not been achieved in the majority of the parliaments and governments in the Western Balkans. Gender equality issues remain marginalised within political discourse and women politicians face discrimination, harassment and violence from the public, and from within their own parties. Women's political representation among mayors and local/municipal levels of government is extremely low, requiring binding legislatively-mandated quotas on party lists and in local executive nominations and appointments.

WITHIN ONE YEAR:

Legislative reform could impose sanctions for non-compliance with existing quota requirements; complaint mechanisms and legal aid could be established within parliaments to tackle discrimination, harassment and violence faced by women politicians. At the municipal level, legislation and regulations should be modified to ensure a minimum of 40% representation, *de facto*, where such provisions do not exist already.

Governments:

- Adopt quotas to ensure a minimum of 40% representation for the less-represented gender in all levels of government: in parliaments (Examples: France, Spain, Portugal), executive cabinet positions, and at all levels of local and municipal councils.
- Adopt quotas to ensure a minimum of 40% representation for the less-represented gender on party lists at all levels of government, requiring that candidates are listed alternatively by gender on party lists to preclude the practice of women being placed at the bottom of the lists (e.g., the "Zipper System": woman, man, woman, etc.) (Example: France).
- Amend existing legislation related to quotas on party lists at all levels of government to provide for sanctions for non-compliance (Examples: Belgium, Spain, Portugal), including the withholding of funds from relevant budgets (Example: France).
- Establish parental and/or carers leave for political representatives (Examples: Sweden, Spain).
- Establish a complaint mechanism within parliament and municipal/local councils to address discrimination, harassment and violence against women in politics, to provide them with the necessary support services, including recognition as a category eligible for the receipt of legal aid, and to collect data on the phenomenon (Examples: Spain, Sweden).
- Ensure there is a system in place for women candidates' representation in media election campaigns.
- Conduct broad-based awareness-raising campaigns to address gender-based discrimination in all levels of political decision-making, in consultation with women's rights organisations.

EU institutions, other inter-governmental organisations and donors:

- Include clear benchmarks in the European Commission Country Reports towards greater participation of women in national parliaments, executive cabinet positions, mayoral positions and municipal/local councils.
- Support Women's Parliamentary Networks, Women's Parliamentary Forums, and Women's Mayors' Networks, where they exist.
- Support the training of journalists on gender-sensitive media coverage in all levels of election coverage, through collaboration with women's rights CSOs.
- Support the participation of relevant women's rights CSOs as accountability agents in budgetary and policy-making consultations at both national and local levels.
- Support women's CSOs to conduct broad-based awareness-raising campaigns to address gender-based discrimination in all levels of political decision-making.
- Engage in separate broad-based national- and local-level awareness-raising campaigns on gender bias in politics.
- Include an intersectional perspective in all programmes aimed at supporting women's political participation.

* Given the diverse situation in each country, the recommendations are generalised, applying to the majority of Western Balkan countries for each recommended action



Reč godine
STUDENTKINJA

Young women protesters at
the International Women's Day
Protests 2025, Belgrade, Serbia;
Photo: Lara Končar

SECURITY FOR WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Attacks on Women Human Rights Defenders

With respect to the EU Treaties and international and European human rights conventions, the EU must promote and protect civic space and fundamental rights (freedom of assembly association and expression) both online and offline. This also applies to its internal and external policies in ensuring that civil society is free from different forms of repression, including but not limited to violent repression, material, and legal. According to the CIVICUS Monitor ratings for this reporting period,⁹⁰ civic space in the Western Balkans remains under significant strain. Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are all rated as narrowed, indicating that, while civil society operates, it faces some restrictions in law and practice. Meanwhile, BiH and Serbia fall under the obstructed category, reflecting a more concerning environment marked by harassment of activists, smear campaigns, and bureaucratic barriers to civic engagement. These ratings highlight the growing pressure on civil society and the urgent need to safeguard democratic freedoms in the region.

The intensifying attacks on Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) across the Western Balkans reveal a region-wide strategy to suppress dissent, discredit feminist and queer advocacy, and undermine accountability. These attacks are not isolated or spontaneous, but rather part of a patterned, cross-country backlash against

emancipatory politics, often orchestrated or tolerated by state and para-state actors. While the specific mechanisms vary by context, a set of common trends can be observed.

WHRDs in Western Balkans are subjected to gendered delegitimisation and symbolic targeting. Over the years, each edition of the *Women's Rights in Western Balkans* report has shown that women who are active and vocal are at the same time uniquely targeted through gendered frames, portrayed as morally deviant, foreign-influenced, or disruptive to national cohesion. Unlike “generic” attacks on civil society, those against WHRDs are laden with misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic violence and symbolism, suggesting a deeper effort to reassert patriarchal and heteronormative order. This symbolic violence is often more powerful than legal repression alone, as it erodes public support and isolates WHRD socially and professionally.

In addition to this the Western Balkans have witnessed widespread institutional inaction and even complicity. Across the region, law enforcement, judicial institutions, and equality bodies consistently fail to provide protection or redress for WHRDs. Even in high-profile cases involving death threats or orchestrated digital harassment, responses are delayed, minimised, or entirely absent. This institutional passivity

⁹⁰ The CIVICUS Monitor is a global research platform that assesses the state of civic space (defined by the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression) across 196 countries. It uses a five-category rating scale to evaluate these conditions: open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed, and closed. Source: CIVICUS, 'People Power Under Attack 2024: Global Findings', CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, Johannesburg, 2024 <https://civicusmonitor.contentfiles.net/media/documents/GlobalFindings2024.EN.pdf>, (Accessed 28 October 2025).

signals tacit approval of anti-rights logic, but it also reinforces the message that certain bodies, particularly queer, feminist, and outspoken, are undeserving of protection.

Digital harassment against WHRD has been detected as a primary modality during the reporting period. While physical violence remains a risk, the predominant form of attack on WHRDs is digital. It consists of coordinated smear campaigns, hate speech, disinformation, doxxing,⁹¹ and threats. These attacks are often triggered by public appearances, media engagement, or participation in institutional processes. The gendered nature of online abuse reflects deep societal discomfort with visible women and queer authority, especially when expressed through public critique or protest.

In some of the Western Balkan's countries, strategic litigation against public participation (known as SLAPP lawsuits) and legal intimidation have been normalised. Whether filed by corporate actors, religious institutions, or public officials, these cases rely on the slow pace and ambiguity of judicial systems to exhaust resources and silence critique. Notably, women and queer activists working on environmental, anti-corruption, or gender justice issues are disproportionately targeted, indicating a convergence between extractive, patriarchal, and authoritarian interests.

The reporting period marked a peak in anti-gender mobilisations across the region, fuelled in part by the global wave of anti-gender politics, in part accelerated by the Donald Trump administration. These developments have not remained confined to political rhetoric, and have directly contributed to a surge in attacks on WHRDs, with anti-gender campaigns emerging as a central force behind efforts to silence and delegitimise their work. In the Western Balkans, anti-gender actors include a mix of religious institutions, far-right political parties, ultraconservative civil society organisations, and regional branches of transnational networks such as CitizenGO, Agenda Europe, and the World Congress of Families. Also worrisome is that societies and institutions allow for attacks to be presented not as repression,

but as defence of the social order. This creates an enabling environment for stigmatisation, censorship, and punitive action.

Throughout 2025, a disproportionate impact on marginalised WHRDs has been observed and documented. Namely, the *Women's Rights in Western Balkans* report indicates that risks are not evenly distributed, since WHRDs who are openly queer, belong to ethnic minority communities, live in rural areas, or work on contested issues such as sexual violence, abortion, accountability for war crimes, or anti-militarism, face compounded vulnerabilities. These intersecting identities both increase their visibility as "targets" and limit their access to networks of solidarity and protection. As a result, attacks on these groups often remain underreported and under-addressed.

According to CONCORD, the EU must place greater emphasis on supporting WHRDs and LGBTQI+ activists, who face distinct and often heightened risks due to systemic discrimination and social exclusion.⁹² To meaningfully challenge patriarchal norms and structural inequalities, EU support must go beyond formal civil society actors and embrace broader, more inclusive understandings of civil society, recognising the crucial role of informal groups and grassroots movements in advancing rights and social justice. Attacks on WHRDs in the Western Balkans are not simply a reflection of deteriorating civic space, but rather its sharpest edge. They reveal the limits of formal democratic commitments when gendered power structures remain intact. What is under threat is not only individual safety, but the legitimacy of feminist and queer politics as such. The reporting period has marked the Western Balkans with ongoing democratic backsliding and increased attacks against WHRDs, which in turn is also not a context conducive to creating a safe and enabling environment for civil society. Additionally, such an environment is also not in line with Article 11 (2) of the *Treaty on European Union* emphasises the importance of open, transparent, and regular dialogue between EU institutions and civil society. Responding to this challenge requires not just protective mechanisms, but a structural confrontation with the political economies of backlash.

91 Doxxing is the act of publicly revealing or publishing private or identifying information about an individual (such as their home address, phone number, or workplace) without their consent, usually with the intent to harass, intimidate, or cause harm.

92 CONCORD, 'Standing strong in the storm: An EU strategy to safeguard civic space worldwide', CONCORD Europe, 2023, <https://concordeurope.org/resource/standing-strong-in-the-storm-an-eu-strategy-to-safeguard-civic-space-worldwide/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

Albania

Recent changes to Albania's legal framework for civil society have brought mixed results. The 2021 *Law on Registration Non-Profit Organisations* introduced some changes but also imposed excessive sanctions for administrative breaches.⁹³ Civil society advocacy led to Constitutional Court revisions, demonstrating the sector's role in legislative reform and providing important checks and balances to law-making processes. In November 2023, the Constitutional Court of Albania announced its decision regarding a case brought by several CSOs challenging provisions of the *Law on the Registration of Non-Profit Organisations*. The applicants argued that certain articles of the law violate the constitutional right to freedom of association, as guaranteed by Article 46 of the *Albanian Constitution* and Article 11 of the *European Convention on Human Rights*. They claimed the contested provisions are also inconsistent with Article 17 of the Constitution and international human rights standards, which stipulate that any restriction of fundamental rights must be clearly defined by law, pursue a legitimate aim, and be proportionate to that aim.⁹⁴ At the time of writing this report, the Constitutional Court has partially accepted the request, revoking the provision that determines the obligation for initial registration within a 30-day period, however, concerns remain over ambiguous registration templates and unclear procedures.⁹⁵

Prior to the Constitutional Court ruling, in 2022 the Prosecutor's Office of Tirana issued an "order" which banned all media in Albania from publishing

leaked documents or in other words, data or information from a cache of files which had been hacked from Albanian servers and computer systems and then leaked online.⁹⁶ During this reporting period, this order continues to raise concerns among civil society about censorship and freedom of expression.⁹⁷ On the fiscal side, in May 2025, the Albanian Tax Administration introduced Certificate 7A, a new directive specifically granting Value Added Tax (VAT) exemption for EU-funded (foreign donor) projects.⁹⁸ While a *Directive on Value Added Tax* exemption for foreign-funded grants is a step forward for CSOs since many projects are funded by international donors, however its vague provisions and a complex electronic tax system have made implementation difficult. As a result, VAT often remains an ineligible cost, prompting CSOs to call for transitional reimbursement mechanisms. These issues reflect the broader challenges civil society in Albania continues to face despite formal legal progress. During the reporting period, the government has not taken adequate measures to address these issues.

In Albania, SLAPP lawsuits have increasingly been used to intimidate and silence activists and journalists. Activists such as environmental defenders and investigative reporters, including women journalists,⁹⁹ have faced defamation suits initiated by private companies in response to their public interest work. These lawsuits, aimed more at burdening individuals with legal costs than seeking justice, contribute to a striking effect on freedom of expression and civic engagement.

93 Balkan Civil Society Development Network, 'Civic Space Report 2024 – Western Balkans', European Civic Forum, 2025, <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-WESTERN-BALKANS.pdf>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

94 Politiko, 'The Constitutional Court grants non-profit organizations the right to freedom of organization', Politiko, 21 November 2023, <https://politiko.al/english/e-tjera/gjykata-kushtetuese-u-jep-te-drejte-organizatave-jofitimprurese-per-liri-i496240>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

95 *Ibid.*

96 International Press Institute – IPI, 'Albania: Media must not face criminal prosecution for public interest reporting', International Press Institute – IPI, 2022, <https://ipi.media/albania-media-must-not-face-criminal-prosecution-for-public-interest-reporting/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

97 Balkan Civil Society Development Network, 'Civic Space Report 2024 - Western Balkans', European Civic Forum, 2025, <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-WESTERN-BALKANS.pdf>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

98 Vat update, 'EU-Funded Projects in Albania Now Exempt from VAT with New Certificate 7A', Vat update, 2025, <https://www.vatupdate.com/2025/05/10/eu-funded-projects-in-albania-now-exempt-from-vat-with-new-certificate-7a/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

99 Balkan Investigative Reporting Network – BIRN, 'Albania Court Hears Judge's Lawsuit Against BIRN', Balkan Investigative Reporting Network – BIRN, 2017, <https://birn.eu.com/news-and-events/albania-court-hears-judges-lawsuit-against-birn/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

Unfortunately, SLAPPs remain largely unregulated in Albania. They fall outside the scope of the country's limited media protections and are insufficiently addressed by the judicial system. This legal gap leaves civil society actors vulnerable to prolonged legal harassment and underscores the urgent need for legal reforms to protect public participation and freedom of speech.

The digital safety of independent media in Albania has also come under increasing threat. In April 2024, Citizens Channel, a well-known independent media outlet, was targeted in a series of coordinated cyberattacks after publishing reports critical of government actions. The attacks included Distributed Denial-of-Service¹⁰⁰ attempts, unauthorised deletion of content from their social media platforms, and a suspicious surge in bots¹⁰¹ posing as followers, likely aimed at manipulating visibility or undermining credibility.

These incidents severely disrupted the outlet's operations and underscored the growing vulnerabilities faced by independent media in Albania's digital space. In the absence of robust digital protections and accountability mechanisms, such attacks pose a serious risk to media freedom and the ability of journalists to inform the public without fear or interference. During the reporting period, relevant institutions have not taken adequate measures to address the barriers that media face in accessing safety.

These gaps are further echoed in AWEN's research¹⁰² that highlights how WHRDs in Albania face multi-level, gendered risks and exclusion. Beyond the threats common to independent media, WHRDs are specifically targeted with online harassment, defamation campaigns, and stigmatisation tied to their focus on sensitive issues such as GBV, LGBTQI+ rights, and minority inclusion. Half of the surveyed WHRDs reported harassment or death threats, while over one-third faced smear campaigns branding them as "anti-family," "foreign agents," or "Soros-funded," undermining both their credibility and personal

safety. Risks are exacerbated by patriarchal norms, political polarisation, and the rise of anti-gender mobilisations, making their work emotionally and professionally exhausting. Intersectionality further compounds this vulnerability: WHRDs working in rural areas or with LGBTQI+ or youth groups reported fewer protections and weaker institutional support than their urban counterparts.¹⁰³ Despite Albania's commitments under CEDAW, the Istanbul Convention, and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, a dedicated legal or policy framework to protect WHRDs remains absent, leaving responses inconsistent and symbolic rather than systemic.

In Albania, a civil society leader from the AWEN was subjected to an orchestrated smear campaign during 2023–2024. The attacks did not relate to her work but rather sought to discredit her and delegitimise the organisation's broader mission on women's rights. A series of partisan¹⁰⁴ media outlets (including *Syri.net*, *Pamfleti*, *Gazeta Impakt*, *Telegraf*, *Publik.al*, and *JOQ Albania*) published defamatory articles that falsely accused her of corruption, mismanagement of donor funds, and personal enrichment. These narratives exploited the fact that AWEN receives support from international donors such as USAID, twisting this into claims that CSOs are "foreign mercenaries" or "agents of external agendas". The harassment took the form of online defamation, disinformation, and reputational attacks. Media outlets exaggerated or deliberately distorted information about CSOs salaries and project funding, framing legitimate civil society work as corrupt or politically motivated. Although there was no physical violence, the persistence and personal tone of these campaigns created an environment of hostility and insecurity for AWEN and WHRDs. This case exemplifies a broader regional pattern in which WHRDs are singled out, not for misconduct, but precisely because of their visibility, leadership, and engagement in advancing gender equality. At the time of writing this report, the online violence against women's rights organisations was ongoing.

100 Distributed Denial-of-Service (also known as DDoS) is a type of cyberattack in which multiple compromised systems are used to overwhelm a targeted server, service, or network with a flood of internet traffic, rendering it inaccessible to legitimate users.

101 Bots are automated software programs that perform repetitive tasks online. In this context, they refer to fake or inauthentic accounts, often used to manipulate engagement metrics, spread disinformation, or disrupt online activity, by artificially inflating follower counts or overwhelming genuine content.

102 Avdulaj, E., 'Women as Human Rights Defenders in Albania: Challenges, Contributions, and Calls to Action', Albanian Women Empowerment Network – AWEN, 2025, <https://awenetwork.org/eng/publikime/research/women-as-human-rights-defenders-in-albania-challenges-contributions-an>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

103 *Ibid.*

104 Partisan journalism refers to a form of journalism that is aligned with a particular political party or ideology and has distinctly biased form of reporting.

Hate speech targeting LGBTQI+ human rights defenders (HRDs) remains a persistent threat to Albania's civil society, often reinforcing broader patterns of exclusion and silencing. While some progress has been noted in media representation, serious incidents continue to undermine these gains. In March 2024, during a live morning TV show, journalist Flavio Qarri misgendered and deadnamed¹⁰⁵ trans activist Luana Myrto. Despite Myrto's formal complaint to the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, at the time of writing the report no measures had been taken, highlighting institutional inaction and the normalisation of transphobic narratives in mainstream media.

In May 2024, the National Platform for Internet Safety and CSO PINK Embassy released a report documenting around 200 online incidents of hate speech, bullying, and sexualised violence targeting LGBTQI+ individuals. The report also noted that sensationalist media coverage and biased reporting continue to fuel online hostility towards queer communities in Albania.

That same month, CSOs Aleanca LGBT and Pro LGBT filed complaints against two representatives of the Pro Life and Family Coalition and Cinema Millennium for discriminatory statements regarding the animated film *Strange World*, which features LGBTQI+ characters. Namely, this movie became the target of controversy because it portrays an openly gay teenage character in a positive, normalised light, a rarity in mainstream family animation. The backlash, particularly from conservative and anti-gender groups, centres on the film's inclusion of LGBTQI+ representation, which they frame as inappropriate for children or as part of a so-called "gender ideology" agenda. Such public attacks are not merely expressions of opinion, they are acts of symbolic violence and clear forms of transphobia and homophobia that contribute to a hostile environment, reinforce stigma, and can severely impact the mental health, safety, and dignity of LGBTQI+ individuals. One complaint resulted in a finding of discrimination, while the other was deferred to mediation, revealing inconsistent institutional responses

and limited accountability. These homophobic and transphobic views at a societal level can also impact how Albanian society views activists that protect or uphold LGBTQI+ rights.

In August 2025, the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare in Albania proposed a new Law on Gender Equality, developed through broad consultations with civil society and designed to align national legislation with EU and international human rights standards, including the Istanbul Convention. However, in October 2025, when the draft reached Parliament, the opposition introduced amendments that sought to redefine "sex" as a "biologically immutable" category of "male" or "female", inserting anti-gender arguments in legislation and effectively making legal gender recognition – for trans and non-binary people to change their name or gender marker in official documents to correspond with their identity – nearly impossible. The proposed changes would erase recognition of gender diversity, remove provisions addressing intersectional discrimination and gender stereotypes, and risk legitimising harmful medical interventions on intersex people. CSOs condemned these amendments as a direct violation of international human rights law and EU equality standards, warning that their adoption would represent a severe setback for gender equality and human rights in Albania.¹⁰⁶

This legislative backlash was accompanied by a wave of public attacks and disinformation targeting WHRDs. One visible case was the smear campaign against Mirela Arqimandriti, Executive Director of the Gender Alliance for Development Center, whose organisation had been actively advocating for alignment of Albanian legislation with EU equality standards. As pressure mounted in Parliament, coordinated efforts sought to delegitimise her work, question her integrity, and portray gender equality initiatives as a threat to Albanian values. In response, civil society organisations from across the Western Balkans issued a joint statement condemning the harassment and calling on Albanian institutions to guarantee a safe and enabling environment for HRDs. The statement emphasised that these

¹⁰⁵ Deadnamed refers to the act of using a transgender or non-binary person's former name, the name they used before transitioning, without their consent. It is widely considered disrespectful and harmful, as it can invalidate their identity and contribute to emotional distress.

¹⁰⁶ Child Rights Centre Albania (CRCA-ECPAT Albania), et al., 'Public Statement: The Draft Law on Gender Equality must be adopted in full and according to the version proposed by the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare in Albania', Child Rights Centre Albania (CRCA-ECPAT Albania), 17 October 2025, <https://www.crca.al/en/public-statement-the-draft-law-on-gender-equality-must-be-adopted-in-full-and-according-to-the-version-proposed-by-the-ministry-of-health-and-social-welfare-in-albania/>, (accessed 07 November 2025).

attacks were not isolated but part of a broader strategy to silence feminist organisations, shrink civic space, and intimidate those working to defend women's rights.

All of the listed incidents reflect how hate speech, when left unaddressed, shrinks Albanian civic space by endangering WHRD and LGBTQI+ activists, reinforcing stigma, and deterring public

participation. This series of legal, digital, and social threats illustrates the multifaceted pressure faced by civil society in Albania. While formal frameworks exist, their limited implementation coupled with weak institutional responses to attacks on WHRDs and LGBTQI+ activists continue to erode civic space, leaving activists, journalists, and various at-risk marginalised communities exposed and unsupported.



Brussels Advocacy Week 2024, Brussels, Belgium;
Photo: Johanna de Tessieres

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The legal environment for civil society in BiH has experienced a sharp and coordinated regression, particularly in the Serb-majority Republika Srpska entity. This decline was officially recognised in September 2023, when BiH was downgraded from “narrowed” to “obstructed” on the CIVICUS *Monitor Watchlist*¹⁰⁷ for 2024, placing it alongside Serbia as one of the most repressive environments for civic space in the Western Balkans.

In 2024, notable progress was made in protecting civic space in BiH, particularly through the adoption of five new progressive laws on freedom of peaceful assembly in five cantons of the FBiH. These laws, developed with support from the OSCE Mission, align with international best practices and represent a positive step forward. However, significant challenges remain due to the fragmented legal framework. Namely, freedom of assembly is still regulated by 12 laws across the country. In major urban centres such as Sarajevo, Mostar, and Banja Luka, legislation remains restrictive, placing undue burdens on organisers and allowing for arbitrary government decisions. A stark example occurred in 2024 in Banja Luka, where CSOs, including the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, faced misdemeanour charges for participating in a peaceful performance titled “Funeral of Democracy,” protesting the adoption of the Foreign Agents Law. Despite posing no threat to public order, activists were penalised, illustrating ongoing misuse of legal provisions to suppress dissent in the country. On appeal, the misdemeanour charges against the activists were annulled by the court.

Unlike isolated legal changes, the deterioration in BiH reflects a deliberate and well-coordinated strategy to shrink civic space. Central to this trend are the 2023 amendments to the Criminal Code recriminalising defamation, and the Law on the Special Registry and Transparency of the Work of Non-Profit Organisations, the so-called “foreign agents” law, adopted by the Republika Srpska National Assembly in early 2025. The

law mandates that all organisations receiving foreign funds register as “agents of foreign influence,” prohibits them from conducting vaguely defined “political activities,” and subjects them to excessive scrutiny, including a criminal penalty for individuals and a work prohibition order leading to the organisation's dissolution. Its broad and ambiguous provisions give authorities wide latitude to suppress dissent and silence critical voices.¹⁰⁸ In May 2025, the Constitutional Court of BiH annulled the Law. It remains to be seen whether the authorities in Republika Srpska will comply with the ruling or choose to disregard it, raising concerns about the rule of law and the protection of civic space. As the UN Special Rapporteur on HRDs Mary Lawlor warned,¹⁰⁹ despite the annulment of the law by the Constitutional Court of BiH, concern remains for the Republika Srpska's government's intention to go ahead with the drafting of secondary legislation, which will be followed by the creation of a register of non-profit groups receiving foreign funding. Lawlor recommended that the legislation be abandoned for good, as such rushed adoption and punitive content represent a grave breach of BiH's constitutional obligations and its international commitments.

These measures are not isolated. As the 2024 edition of the *Women's Rights in Western Balkans* report states, the re-criminalisation of defamation in Republika Srpska in 2023, framed as an accountability measure, has further restricted free expression and opened the door to prosecutions against journalists and activists.

Underlying these legal initiatives is a hostile political narrative in which Republika Srpska officials consistently portray CSOs and independent media as threats to national sovereignty and tools of foreign interference. This narrative is reinforced by anti-gender and anti-EU organisations, which in 2024, during public discussions on the Draft Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, attacked women's CSOs

107 CIVICUS, ‘CIVICUS Monitor – Tracking Civic Space: Europe and Central Asia’, CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, Johannesburg, 2024, https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2024/europeandcentralasia/, (accessed 29 October 2025).

108 Balkan Civil Society Development Network, ‘Civic Space Report 2024 - Western Balkans’, European Civic Forum, 2025, <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-WESTERN-BALKANS.pdf>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

109 United Nations, ‘Bosnia and Herzegovina: Human rights defenders stigmatized amid legal uncertainty and political tension says UN expert’, United Nations – Bosnia and Herzegovina, 20 June 2025, <https://bosniaherzegovina.un.org/en/296641-bosnia-and-herzegovina-human-rights-defenders-stigmatized-amid-legal-uncertainty-and>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

that provide specialised support to GBV victims/survivors, accusing them of using foreign funds to promote so-called “gender ideology”. The law ultimately failed to progress to parliamentary procedure, illustrating how such rhetoric undermines both legislative reform and the legitimacy of CSOs working on gender equality. Combined with the selective enforcement of laws targeting only critical voices, this demonstrates that the legislation serves as a mechanism of political control rather than the public interest.

Beyond legislation, civil society is under mounting pressure through legal intimidation, most notably via SLAPPs lawsuits. According to the CASE Coalition, BiH ranks among the highest in the Western Balkans for SLAPP cases, alongside Serbia. Environmental defenders are especially targeted, facing lawsuits for organising actions or investigations criticising mining operations in places like Vareš. Namely, such lawsuit has been initiated by the British company Adriatic Metals, which in 2023 sued the woman activist Hajrija Čobo from Kakanj for the so-called damage to the reputation of this concessionaire who spent the past period doing research and exploitation of ores in Vareš, as written about in the 2024 edition of *Women's Rights in Western Balkans*. During the reporting period, charges against Čobo were dismissed, and at the time of writing this report, she is seeking compensation for damages from the initial SLAPP lawsuit.¹¹⁰ While a draft anti-SLAPP law has been introduced in the FBiH, its prospects remain uncertain in the current political climate.

According to the preliminary findings of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of HRDs,¹¹¹ Mary Lawlor, WHRDs in BiH play an essential role in promoting justice, equality, and democratic values, particularly in areas such as transitional justice, environmental protection, LGBTQI+ rights, and support for migrants. Despite their critical contributions, WHRDs face heightened and gender-specific risks. The Special Rapporteur emphasised that being a woman acts as a risk

multiplier, with WHRDs frequently subjected to SLAPP lawsuits, online misogyny, physical threats, and stigmatisation, especially when their work challenges dominant norms or gains public visibility. These attacks are compounded by limited institutional protection and social pressure from families and communities, resulting in many WHRDs choosing not to report threats or incidents. This reflects a broader pattern of gendered retaliation and structural neglect that undermines the safety and work of WHRDs in the country.

During the reporting period, threats, abuse, and legal harassment against HRDs have intensified. Activists working on anti-corruption, gender equality, transitional justice, environmental protection, and LGBTQI+ rights are increasingly targeted by inflammatory political rhetoric and retaliatory inspections. In Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, several CSOs and media outlets were subjected to repeated inspections widely seen as punitive. In late 2024, Banja Luka-based independent media outlets Capital and Buka were subjected to inspections by tax authorities following public accusations from Republika Srpska former president Milorad Dodik that these organisations misused international donor funds, particularly from USAID. Although the authorities framed the inspections as routine oversight, both outlets reported them as politically motivated acts of intimidation. These measures unfolded in parallel with the adoption of the “foreign agents” law. The absence of effective institutional protection has fostered an environment of fear and impunity.

This pattern of legal repression, targeted attacks, and institutional inaction reflects a broader effort to silence dissent and weaken democratic accountability in BiH. Without strong safeguards, independent civil society, media, and (W)HRDs remain increasingly vulnerable, underscoring the urgent need for international pressure and renewed domestic commitment to fundamental rights.

110 Front Line Defenders, ‘Court rules in favour of Hajrija Čobo in defamation lawsuit’, Front Line Defenders, 2024, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/court-rules-favour-hajrija-cobo-defamation-lawsuit>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

111 Lawlor, M., ‘End-of-Mission Statement – Official Country Visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina [English / BCS]’, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, 2025, End-of-Mission Statement – Official Country Visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina [English / BCS] - UN SR Human Rights Defenders, (accessed 29 October 2025).

Kosovo

The civic space in Kosovo is shaped by a challenging political environment, where public discourse is increasingly dominated by the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue. This has sidelined key governance debates, while tensions, especially in the north, have escalated, culminating in the Banjska attack of 24 September 2023, the most serious security incident in years.¹¹²

Civil society in Kosovo raised concerns over the use of SLAPP lawsuits aimed at silencing critical reporting and activism. However, the absence of systematic monitoring and analysis of SLAPP cases makes it difficult to assess the full scope and impact of this trend.¹¹³

WHRDs and journalists in Kosovo face targeted reputational attacks, often by public figures using media platforms to discredit feminist voices. One example of such harmful initiative happened in May 2024, when journalist and activist Leonida Molliqaj became the subject of public slander by TV host Kron Sadiku after she declined to appear on his programme. In retaliation for her rejection, Sadiku accused her and feminist organisations of misusing funds and “endangering lives” during past protests, and adding claims that echoed broader anti-gender narratives aimed at delegitimising feminist work.

Molliqaj publicly rejected the accusations and condemned the threatening language used against her, framing it as part of a broader attempt to intimidate and silence women activists. The Kosovo Women Journalists Network issued a statement in her defence, denouncing the misogynistic rhetoric and affirming that such attacks are directed not only at individuals, but at the feminist movement as a whole. This case highlights how public figures and media actors can contribute to a hostile environment for

WHRDs, using smear tactics and disinformation to undermine their credibility and deter public participation.

Another case of ongoing media harassment against a HRD in Kosovo occurred in January 2025,¹¹⁴ when the T7 television programme “Zanat” aired a segment that sparked public outrage. During the episode, a guest referred to transgender woman and advocate for trans rights Edona James by her birth name, stating, “Edona James për mu është Kujtim!” (Translation: “To me, Edona James is Kujtim!”) — a remark widely perceived as deliberate misgendering and a dismissal of her gender identity. The programme further spread disinformation by equating gender-affirming hormonal therapy with hormonal changes after pregnancy, distorting public understanding of transgender healthcare. Clips of the segment circulated on Instagram and Facebook, amplifying the harm and triggering widespread backlash against both Edona and the trans community. This incident followed a pattern of prior targeted attacks against James, including a 2023 Gazeta Express article publishing a childhood photo and headline reading, “A small boy, this is what Edona James looked like at six years old,” and repeated use of her deadname by outlets such as *Sot News* and *Pamfleti* to drive engagement. These persistent media portrayals have contributed to harmful stereotypes and societal stigma against the LGBTQI+ community in Kosovo.

Anti-gender rhetoric intensified during the 2024 election campaign. In early 2025, feminist and LGBTQI+ HRDs in Kosovo faced intensified attacks, particularly during debates on the Draft Law on Reproductive Health and Medically Assisted Conception.¹¹⁵ MPs and political actors used misinformation and hate speech to discredit activists, such as Kosovo Women’s Network or

112 Balkan Civil Society Development Network, ‘Civic Space Report 2024 - Western Balkans’, European Civic Forum, 2025, <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-WESTERN-BALKANS.pdf>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

113 European Commission, ‘Kosovo 2024 Report’, European Commission – Enlargement, Brussels, European Commission, 2024, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/c790738e-4cf6-4a43-a8a9-43c1b6f01e10_en?filename=Kosovo%20Report%202024.pdf, (accessed 29 October 2025).

114 Rashiti, V., ‘Mapping gendered disinformation in the Western Balkans: Kosovo’, Reporting Diversity Network – RDN, Kosovo 2.0 and Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans, 2025, https://www.reportingdiversity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Gendered_Disinformation_KS_fin.pdf, (accessed 29 October 2025).

115 *Ibid.*

the “We March, We Don’t Celebrate” campaign, advocating for the law, portraying them as anti-family and anti-nation. This hostile rhetoric escalated during the national election campaign, with the newly formed political party Coalition for the Family gaining disproportionate media coverage by spreading disinformation and inciting public hostility toward these activists. The Coalition for Families repeatedly used anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric in public rallies and media appearances, prompting a complaint by the organisation Centre for Equality and Liberty of the LGBT community in Kosova and the LGBTQI+ platform *Dylberizm*.¹¹⁶ Kosovo’s Electoral Complaints and Appeals Panel (ECAP) fined the Coalition €4,500,¹¹⁷ citing violations of the Law on General Elections and the Code of Conduct. ECAP found that the language used was offensive, discriminatory, and aimed at inciting hatred, undermining electoral ethics and democratic principles.¹¹⁸ This case highlights how political actors in Kosovo use anti-gender rhetoric to mobilise support through fear and division, and underscores the importance of holding perpetrators to account.

This hostile environment persisted into 2025, when smear campaigns and disinformation targeting feminist activists became increasingly coordinated and visible. The offices of QIKA in Prishtina,¹¹⁹ which had been repeatedly targeted online for their outspoken support of Pride Week and advocacy for LGBTQI+ rights, were vandalised in 2024 — windows were smashed, the property was damaged, and threatening graffiti was left on the building. Activists reported receiving anonymous online threats both before and after the attack, suggesting the vandalism was intended as a warning to silence their work. In parallel, several prominent feminist activists faced a wave of defamatory articles in online media,

where journalists distorted their statements, labelled them “gold diggers” or “foreign-funded opportunists,” and fabricated headlines unrelated to their actual words. These coordinated media attacks were designed to provoke hostile comments and incite further harassment, creating a climate in which WHRDs in Kosovo are forced to spend significant time and resources on personal and organisational security rather than advancing their advocacy for gender equality.

While attacks against WHRDs in Kosovo often take the form of harassment, slander, or online abuse, more subtle and institutionalised forms of repression are increasingly visible. One example is the state’s response to the 2024 International Women’s Day protest organised by the MARShojmë S’Festojmë collective. For the first time since the annual feminist march began nearly a decade ago, participants were met with a heavy police cordon, blocking access to government buildings and reinforcing a narrative of feminists as disruptive or dangerous.¹²⁰ These alarming changes point to worrying trends of democratic backsliding in Kosovo, and expose how public figures and institutions in Kosovo actively or tacitly participate in discrediting and suppressing feminist voices. Whether through hate speech, reputational attacks, or policing protests, such actions undermine both gender equality and democratic accountability. A related case is the prolonged harassment of Flutura Kusari, Senior Legal Advisor at the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, who has faced sustained online and verbal abuse, including threats to her and her family, from a prominent activist of the ruling party Vetëvendosje for over three years. In June 2025, Kusari filed charges against the perpetrator, a move that drew public support from numerous international press freedom organisations.¹²¹

116 Center for Equality and Liberty – CEL Kosova, ‘Annual Report’, CEL Kosova, 2025, https://cel-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/CEL-Kosova_Raporti-Vjetor-2024_compressed-2.pdf, (accessed 29 October 2025).

117 Kosovo Judicial Council, ‘Election Complaints and Appeals Panel’, Dylberizm, Pristina, 2025, <https://www.dylberizm.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/REPUBLIKA-E-KOSOVES-REPUBLIKA-KOSOVA-REPUBLIC-OF-KOSOVO.pdf>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

118 Telegrafi, ‘ECAP fines the Coalition for Families for using anti-LGBTI+ language’, Telegrafi, 22 January 2025, <https://telegrafi.com/en/pzap-gjobit-koalicionin-per-familje-per-perdorim-te-gjuhes-anti-lgbti/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

119 Rashiti, V., ‘Mapping gendered disinformation in the Western Balkans: Kosovo’, Reporting Diversity Network – RDN, Kosovo 2.0 and Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans, 2025, https://www.reportingdiversity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Gendered_Disinformation_KS_fin.pdf, (accessed 29 October 2025).

120 Rashiti, V., ‘We only have each other’, Kosovo 2.0, Prishtina, 2024, <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/we-only-have-each-other/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

121 European Centre for Press & Media Freedom – ECPMF, ‘Kosovo: Steadfast support for Flutura Kusari as she seeks justice against Mentor Llugaliu’s harassment’, European Centre for Press & Media Freedom – ECPMF, 20 June 2025, https://www.ecpmf.eu/kosovo-steadfast-support-for-flutura-kusari-as-she-seeks-justice-against-mentor-llugaliu-harassment/?fbclid=IwY2xjawMBSBRleHRuA2FlbQlxMABicmlkETFDszJJaFbqMklmOGZDdmhUAR40Z5RUH0QyeasbyQMIX_r_bE30iXijGRxl1p-54b-fjKAaXMy1S0CZzNmgw_aem_u6fPxxno8ODKk8xcmtu0Bw#Kosovo, (accessed 29 October 2025).

Montenegro

While Montenegro maintains a formal legal framework that enables civil society to operate freely, in practice, the environment has become increasingly restrictive.¹²² High-level politicians have repeatedly disparaged CSOs critical of the government,¹²³ and meaningful cooperation mechanisms, such as the Council for Cooperation with Non-Governmental Organisations has been non-functional for over two years, with six failed attempts to appoint CSO representatives.¹²⁴ However, in December 2024, the Ministry for Regional Investment Development and Cooperation with Non-Governmental Organisations published a call for expressions of interest for membership in the Council for Government Cooperation with Non-Governmental Organisations.¹²⁵ The selection framework itself raises concerns. Namely, gender equality is missing among the 12 designated areas of CSO work, meaning that it can only be indirectly linked to the category of “protection of human and minority rights, including persons with disabilities”. Additionally, only one member is appointed per area of activity, significantly limiting the inclusion of HRDs and specialists working on specific issues. At the same time, long-stalled amendments to the Law on Non-Governmental Organisations, blocked for over four years, entered a revision process in December 2024. At the time of writing this report, no single consultative meeting between the responsible ministry and CSOs has been held, further undermining trust and reinforcing the perception of a shrinking civic space in Montenegro.

Legal uncertainties further constrain the sector. Pending legal reforms are expected to introduce

limitations on CSOs’ ability to carry out economic activities, such as providing paid services or engaging in social entrepreneurship, which are often essential for their financial sustainability. At the same time, there are indications that the government may eliminate the guaranteed minimum percentage of public funds allocated to CSOs, a mechanism that was hard-won through years of civil society advocacy and would ensure a basic level of state support for civil society initiatives. Additionally, the process for VAT exemption on EU-funded grants remains opaque, with CSOs unclear about which institution is responsible for implementation—hindering access to resources and effective project delivery.¹²⁶

These challenges are compounded by serious concerns over state surveillance. In 2024, Dejan Peruničić, the former Director of the National Security Agency was indicted for unlawfully ordering the surveillance of over 50 individuals, including at least 15 civil society members.¹²⁷ The UN Human Rights Committee has urged Montenegro to establish judicial oversight and ensure remedies for those affected. Peruničić’s actions undermine European values, as state surveillance technology against activists is fundamentally at odds with rule of law and democratic principles.¹²⁸

The first SLAPP lawsuits in Montenegro emerged in cases targeting journalists and bore all the hallmarks of this form of financial violence: critical speech met with lawsuits by powerful officials, corporations, or business figures, often demanding disproportionately high

122 Balkan Civil Society Development Network, ‘Civic Space Report 2024 - Western Balkans’, European Civic Forum, 2025, <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-WESTERN-BALKANS.pdf>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

123 *Ibid.*

124 European Commission, ‘Montenegro 2024 Report’, European Commission – Enlargement, Brussels, European Commission, 2024, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/Montenegro%20Report%202024.pdf>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

125 Government of Montenegro, ‘Javni poziv za predlaganje predstavnika NVO u Savjetu za saradnju organa državne uprave i nevladinih organizacija’, Government of Montenegro, Podgorica, 2025, <https://www.gov.me/en/documents/16886771-ae08-472d-9c33-1aa86c458ee7>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

126 Balkan Civil Society Development Network, ‘Civic Space Report 2024 - Western Balkans’, European Civic Forum, 2025, <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-WESTERN-BALKANS.pdf>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

127 Milić, P., ‘Crna Gora: Optužni predlog protiv bivšeg šefa ANB-a zbog nezakonitog prisluškivanja’, Glas Amerike, Podgorica, 18 September 2024, <https://www.glasamerike.net/amp/balkan-crna-gora-nab-perunicic-prisluškivanje/7788848.html>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

128 Stevanović, T., ‘Citizens’ Nightmare: A Manual for Understanding Spyware’, Share Foundation, 2025, <https://sharefoundation.info/en/citizens-nightmare-a-manual-for-understanding-spyware/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

compensation.¹²⁹ While the frequency of SLAPPs has declined over time as civic space expanded, the practice has not been entirely overcome.

Further deteriorating the environment for civil society was noted in October 2024, when the Coalition for the Future of Montenegro, comprised of pro-Russian parties from the former Democratic Front, publicly called for the urgent adoption of a Law on Agents of Foreign Influence. The proposed law would target organisations they allege to be “foreign agencies” operating under the guise of non-governmental organisations to influence Montenegro’s domestic and foreign policy. This initiative was met with alarm by civil society actors and opposition parties, who denounced it as a serious threat to democratic standards and Montenegro’s path toward European integration.¹³⁰ Such initiatives stand in direct contradiction to EU accession requirements such as those in the European Commission’s *Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in Enlargement Countries (2021–2027)*, which call for an enabling environment for civil society, including the protection of freedoms of association, expression, and participation without intimidation or undue restrictions. They also conflict with political criteria under Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security), which require candidate countries to ensure democratic governance, rule of law, and civic participation free from intimidation or restrictive legislation. Although the proposal came from a minority faction within the ruling coalition, it is nonetheless politically significant. The two parties hold 13 Parliamentary seats and occupy key executive positions, including two Vice-Presidents and three ministerial posts in Prime Minister Milojković’s government. Importantly, the initiative has not received backing from the rest of the ruling coalition.

The push for a Foreign Agents Law is part of a broader pattern of hostility toward civil society in Montenegro and the region as a whole. As noted by the Centre for Democratic Transition, this initiative escalates long-standing state intolerance toward criticism from CSOs, journalists, feminists, and HRDs.¹³¹ Over the years, activists have been targeted based on political affiliation or dissent, with attacks coming directly from high-ranking officials. Deputy Prime Minister Milun Zogović recently referred to activists as “rabbits”¹³² driven from hiding by the law’s announcement, language that is dehumanising and inflammatory. Similarly, Jovan Vučurović, Member of Parliament and Chair of the Human Rights Committee, dismissed parts of the civil society sector as “para-political actors” serving hidden agendas,¹³³ framing civic engagement as a threat rather than a democratic necessity. Such statements reflect an authoritarian mindset that seeks to label civil society as foreign-influenced and subversive. The impact is reinforced by smear campaigns in pro-government media and social networks, portraying CSOs as overfunded, anti-national actors.

The ongoing targeting of civil society actors in Montenegro has not only been rhetorical or institutional but has also taken the form of direct attacks, intimidation, and harassment. In its 2025 Concluding Observations,¹³⁴ the UN Human Rights Committee expressed deep concern over widespread reports of violence and misogynistic speech directed at women in public life, including women activists, politicians, and journalists. It also highlighted that institutional responses to such violations remain weak, contributing to a climate of impunity and silencing critical voices.

These concerns are clearly illustrated in attacks against members of the informal student group “Kamo Šutra?”, which emerged in response to

129 Bosilkova-Antovska, A., and Mladenovska, S., ‘From Silence to Strength: A Regional Response to SLAPPs in the Western Balkans’, Balkan Civil Society Development Network – BCSDN, Skopje, 2024, <https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/55-4-BCSDN-Regional-SLAPP-Research.pdf>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

130 CDM, ‘CDT: Kako vlasti targetiraju NVO aktiviste’, CDM, 28 October 2024, <https://www.cdm.me/politika/cdt-kako-vlasti-targetiraju-nvo-aktiviste/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

131 *Ibid.*

132 Portal 083, ‘Zogović: Zečevi se prepali!’, Portal 083, 12 October 2024, <https://portal083.me/politika/zogovic-zecevi-se-prepali/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

133 Alo Online, ‘VUČUROVIĆ: Crnu Goru i njenu političku stvarnost kontrolišu parapolitičke organizacije’, Alo Online, 11 November 2024, <https://aloonline.me/crna-gora/vucurovic-crnu-goru-i-njenu-politicku-stvarnost-kontrolisu-parapoliticke-organizacije/>, (Accessed 28 October 2025).

134 Human Rights Committee, ‘Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Montenegro (CCPR/C/MNE/CO/2)’, United Nations Digital Library, Geneva, United Nations Human Rights Committee, 2025, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4081574?ln=ar&v=pdf>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

a mass shooting in Cetinje which claimed 13 fatalities in 2025.¹³⁵ The group, which includes members of the LGBTQI+ community, organised protests demanding political accountability, demilitarisation, and progressive reforms in gun control, policing, and education. In line with broader human rights demands put forward by the Center for Women's Rights and Human Rights Action, the students called for urgent institutional changes to prevent further violence and ensure public safety. In retaliation for their activism, members of the group have been publicly accused by the ruling party Demokratska Crna Gora of having links to organised crime, a claim widely seen as an attempt to discredit their demands. Right-wing media, closely aligned with government factions, have also targeted queer student organisers with personal attacks, online hate speech, and threats rooted in homophobia and transphobia. One student activist was reportedly evicted from her apartment in apparent reprisal for her visible role in the protests, indicating that the repression extended into everyday life.¹³⁶

LGBTQI+ HRDs in Montenegro¹³⁷ are most likely to face disproportionate levels of violence, harassment, and institutional neglect, often as a direct result of their visibility and advocacy efforts.

In December 2024, two LGBTQI+ activists were violently targeted in a disturbing incident that underscored the hostile climate surrounding queer activism.¹³⁸ An unknown assailant broke down the door of their home with a hammer while one of them was alone. This incident followed shortly after both queer rights activists had been verbally assaulted in public with slurs such as "Satan, get out of here." The activists, known for their public engagement on LGBTQI+ rights, emphasised that these were not isolated events but part of a broader pattern of discrimination.

While the swift police response and sentencing of the perpetrator were welcomed, the case highlighted the urgent need for systemic protection of all LGBTQI+ individuals and (W)HRDs.

Only a few months later, in April 2025, another incident occurred¹³⁹ when homophobic graffiti, reading "Fa****s out of this neighbourhood!", was painted on a residential building in Podgorica where two trans individuals live. According to feminist trans rights CSO Spektra, before this incident, the two trans individuals had already been subjected to a series of attacks near their home in Podgorica between December and January 2025, occurring on three separate occasions. In the latest assault, a group used metal rods and stones to carry out the attack.¹⁴⁰ Although the victims/survivors promptly reported each incident, they received no updates from the police regarding the identification or prosecution of the perpetrators. While some minors were reportedly identified at the time, the victims/survivors stated that despite offering to help with identification, the police failed to take further action.¹⁴¹

Beyond these cases, ongoing threats persist. Prominent LGBTQI+ activist Danijel Kalezić has faced repeated death threats since 2022, with no information about state action or prosecutions to date. This impunity raises serious concerns, as noted by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA-) Europe,¹⁴² highlighting the immense challenges LGBTQI+ civil society faces in continuing its work amid growing hostility and a lack of institutional support.

A further example of the ongoing hostility toward WHRDs occurred in April 2025, when the Basic State Prosecutor's Office in Podgorica opened a case *ex officio* concerning online attacks against

135 Rudović, M. 'Šta je i kako je nastala organizacija studenata 'Kamo šutra?', Radio Slobodna Evropa, 10 February 2025, Crna Gora, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-studentska-organizacija-kamo-sutra/33309753.html>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

136 Asocijacija Spektra, 'Contribution to 2025 Annual Report on Montenegro', Asocijacija Spektra, 2025, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1is3qEYWSZPmgvC7MslclFNml4ZDhY6E0ks3Z3t9Xjs/mobilebasic>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

137 *Ibid.*

138 REAct, 'LGBTQ activists confront violence: a call to action from Montenegro', REAct, 04 December 2023, <https://16.react-aph.org/lgbtq-activists-confront-violence-a-call-to-action-from-montenegro/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

139 Asocijacija Spektra, 'Contribution to 2025 Annual Report on Montenegro', Asocijacija Spektra, 2025, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1is3qEYWSZPmgvC7MslclFNml4ZDhY6E0ks3Z3t9Xjs/mobilebasic>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

140 *Ibid.*

141 Portal Analitika, 'Podgorica: Napadnute transrodne osobe smatraju kako policija nije odradila svoj posao', Portal Analitika, Crna hronika, 20 January 2025, <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/podgorica-napadnute-transrodne-osobe-smatraju-kako-policija-nije-odradila-svoj-posao>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

142 ILGA Europe, 'Annual Review 2024 - Montenegro', ILGA-Europe, Brussels, 2024, https://www.ilga-europe.org/files/uploads/2024/02/2024_montenegro.pdf, (accessed 28 October 2025).

Vanja Čalović Marković, Executive Director of the Network for the Affirmation of the Non-Governmental Sector. The Facebook page “Narodna sloga” published a photo referencing the smear campaign launched against her by the tabloid *Informer* in 2014, effectively reviving and amplifying earlier defamatory narratives. The new attacks were a continuation of earlier digital harassment, including smear campaigns from as far back as 2014 with elements of sexual harassment and even fabricated claims of bestiality with her dog, now repurposed into new memes that build on and amplify the previous defamatory content. This incident marks the second time Čalović Marković has been the target of coordinated public harassment, underscoring the persistent vulnerability of outspoken WHRDs in Montenegro and the cyclical nature of online violence against them.

The increasingly hostile environment for (W)HRDs in Montenegro also extends to the journalistic community. Especially women journalists remain a frequent target of intimidation and violence. One of the most alarming recent incidents occurred on November 11, 2024, when Pobjeda journalist Ana Raičković and her family members were physically attacked by Zoran Čoć Bećirović

and his private security. The assault, which involved verbal abuse and physical violence, was widely condemned as a grave violation of media freedom, the integrity of journalism, and basic human rights. In 2024, there were twenty recorded cases of intimidation or attacks on media workers in Montenegro.¹⁴³ Among the most brutal attacks were those targeting women journalists Ana Raičković and Duška Pejović,¹⁴⁴ both known for their critical reporting on power structures. These incidents pose a serious threat not only to media freedom but also contribute to the silencing of women journalists, reinforcing a climate of fear and self-censorship that undermines press independence and freedom of expression in the country.

Together, these cases reveal a troubling erosion of civic space in Montenegro, where criticism is too often met with intimidation, smear campaigns, legal harassment, and impunity for perpetrators, especially when perpetrators are government officials. Despite strong resistance from civil society, institutional inaction and political hostility continue to undermine fundamental rights. Safeguarding free expression and democratic participation now requires not only reform, but clear political will.



Women Human Rights Defenders at the Bosnia and Herzegovina Networking Meeting 2025, Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Photo: Imrana Kapetanović

143 Sindikat Medija, 'Nadležni da konačno kazne sve napade na medijske radnike', Sindikat medija, 22 January 2025, [https://sindikatomedija.me/saopstenja/nadlezni-da-konacno-kazne-sve-napade-na-medijske-radnike/](https://sindikatomedija.me/saopštenja/nadlezni-da-konacno-kazne-sve-napade-na-medijske-radnike/), (Accessed 28 October 2025).

144 *Ibid.*

North Macedonia

In 2024, the security and enabling environment for (W)HRDs in North Macedonia has shown signs of stagnation and even regression, despite the country's longstanding aspirations for EU integration and democratic reform.¹⁴⁵ Civil society continues to play a critical role in defending rights and democratic values, yet (W)HRDs face a narrowing civic space marked by weak institutional support, insufficient protection mechanisms, and a decline in meaningful state-civil society cooperation.

One of the most troubling developments is the persistent deterioration of institutional dialogue between the government and civil society. The Council for Cooperation between the Government and Civil Society remained non-functional from March 2022 until early 2025, when new members were appointed and its activities resumed. As reported, CSOs have voiced concerns not only about the Council's dysfunction but also about the government's overall attitude toward civic actors, citing a lack of both substantive and formal engagement. Since the Council for Cooperation between the Government and Civil Society has not addressed any of civil society's concerns during the reporting period, the boycott persists and indicates that there is not an enabling environment for civil society in North Macedonia.

Another serious threat to the security of (W)HRDs in North Macedonia is the misuse of legal mechanisms, most notably defamation laws, to suppress dissent and intimidate critical voices. In 2025, a prominent WHRD received two warnings about a defamation and insult lawsuit from anti-gender actors demanding a public apology and denial of statements she made while appearing on a podcast related to anti-gender mobilisations in education. For this reason, the podcast episode was removed from YouTube. As of the time of writing this report, the court has not yet sent a summons for her trial.

A high-profile case from November 2023 saw a woman journalist Saska Cvetkovska and the prominent investigative media outlet *IRL* for which she writes found liable in a defamation lawsuit, based on a disturbingly narrow and legally flawed interpretation of the Law on Associations and Foundations.¹⁴⁶ The ruling, widely condemned by civil society actors and media watchdogs, set a dangerous precedent that threatens to erode both freedom of expression and freedom of association, while legitimising further judicial harassment of journalists and activists. As a follow up to this case, in 2024 Saska Cvetkovska and *IRL* have formally appealed the decision in higher courts and intend to submit a case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

Although SLAPP lawsuits are not formally recognised in North Macedonia's legal system, the lack of specific legal protections allows defamation proceedings to be exploited as tools of silencing and pressure, undermining democratic accountability and open public discourse.

The European Commission's 2024 Report on North Macedonia¹⁴⁷ highlights serious concerns for the safety of WHRDs in particular. Although the legal framework to address GBV exists, enforcement remains weak, and protective services are inadequate. More often than not, perpetrators of attacks enjoy impunity. WHRDs continue to face threats and intimidation, often without an adequate institutional response, raising questions about the state's willingness and ability to ensure their safety.

In previous editions of *Women's Rights in Western Balkans*, the report has flagged the rise of anti-gender mobilisations in North Macedonia and much of the region. These mobilisations present an escalating threat to the safety and work of (W)HRDs, particularly those advocating for gender equality, women's rights, and LGBTIQ+ rights.

¹⁴⁵ European Commission, 'North Macedonia 2024 Report', European Commission – Enlargement, Brussels, European Commission, 2024, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5f0c9185-ce46-46fc-bf44-82318ab47e88_en, (accessed 28 October 2025).

¹⁴⁶ Balkan Civil Society Development Network, 'Civic Space Report 2024 - Western Balkans', European Civic Forum, 2025, <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-WESTERN-BALKANS.pdf>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

¹⁴⁷ European Commission, 'North Macedonia 2024 Report', European Commission – Enlargement, Brussels, European Commission, 2024, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5f0c9185-ce46-46fc-bf44-82318ab47e88_en, (accessed 28 October 2025).

In recent years, these mobilisations have grown in both scale and influence. Driven by a mix of far-right populism and religious conservatism, most notably with the active participation of the Orthodox Church, anti-gender actors¹⁴⁸ have orchestrated coordinated propaganda campaigns and lobbied against inclusive policies under the guise of protecting “children and traditional values.” This trend has continued into this reporting period as well.

Alarming, anti-gender actors in North Macedonia in 2024 are increasingly using a coordinated set of tactics to silence not only WHRDs, but artists, psychologists, educators, and cultural institutions that implement initiatives that promote gender equality and queer culture.¹⁴⁹ These tactics include disinformation campaigns, reputational attacks, incitement of moral panic, public smear campaigns, and censorship. Social media platforms are a key arena for attacks perpetrated by these actors, where fabricated content and inflammatory language are used to distort facts, provoke outrage, and incite hate speech or even direct threats. At the same time, censorship is emerging as a powerful tool, with public and academic institutions increasingly pressured to cancel events, withdraw support, or silence discussion on gender and sexuality-related issues. During the reporting period, there have been numerous emblematic cases that illustrate how these tactics are used to shrink civic space and endanger those advancing human rights and social cohesion.

CSO Ekvalis, known for its youth-focused LGBTI+ programs, faced threats and was forced to cancel its summer camp in Kratovo after being targeted by far-right and religious figures. Accused of promoting “immorality,” the organisation was subjected to hate speech and explicit threats of violence, including public calls to physically harm organisers. Despite filing legal complaints, the authorities failed to respond

adequately, and the organisation had to relocate under security measures, marking a significant blow to local grassroots organising. This case highlights the impunity enjoyed by anti-gender actors and the failure of institutions to uphold basic protections. It also directly contradicts EU accession requirements for North Macedonia, particularly those under Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights),¹⁵⁰ which call for effective institutional safeguards against hate speech, discrimination, and violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Furthermore, it violates commitments under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights,¹⁵¹ which guarantees the freedom of assembly and association (Article 12), including the right to organise and participate in peaceful public events without fear of violence or repression.

Following pressure and online backlash, a lecture on transgender healthcare organised by Macedonian Medical Students Association and prominent trans activist Lila Milikj, was abruptly cancelled by targeted campaigning from anti-gender actors. The lecture, intended to educate medical students about local gender-affirming care, was misrepresented as controversial. The organisers, instead of supporting Milikj issued a public apology and removed all materials, showing how academic institutions are vulnerable to anti-gender pressure and increasingly avoid topics seen as politically sensitive. Such lectures may in some cases be the only contact that medical students have with gender-affirming care and the cancellation of lectures such as these may mean that medical students do not have an opportunity to be sensitised to the needs of trans communities. Trans activists and CSOs are often the only actors pushing for such lectures or trainings, and the space for them to do this work is continually shrinking.

The Institute Alternativa was falsely accused of indoctrinating schoolchildren with “LGBTQI+

148 Cvetković, I., and Velichkovska, M., ‘Who Is Afraid of Gender? Analysis of the Key Narratives and Strategies of the Anti-Gender Movement in the Republic of North Macedonia’, Coalition Margins, Skopje, 2023, p. 8, <https://ba.boell.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/who-is-afraid-of-gender-eng.pdf>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

149 Cvetković, I., and Velichkovska, M., ‘Тишина меѓу редови: Безбедноста на бранителките на човекови права’, Coalition Margins, Skopje, 2024, https://coalition.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Tishina-megju-redovi_compressed.pdf, (Accessed 28 October 2025).

150 European Commission, ‘North Macedonia 2024 Report’, European Commission – Enlargement, Brussels, European Commission, 2024, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5f0c9185-ce46-46fc-bf44-82318ab47e88_en, (accessed 28 October 2025).

151 European Union, Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 12: “Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and to freedom of association at all levels, in particular in political, trade union and civic matters”, European Union, Brussels, 2012, https://commission.europa.eu/aid-development-cooperation-fundamental-rights/your-fundamental-rights-eu/know-your-rights/freedoms/freedom-assembly-and-association_en, (accessed 28 October 2025).

ideology.” The campaign targeted the organisation’s partnerships with public institutions and UN bodies, framing them as part of a “foreign plot”. This is a common tactic used by anti-gender groups across the Western Balkan region, where CSOs and activists are accused of being “foreign agents” or bringing in “foreign ideologies” so as to associate their work as something that does not fit in with the (majority) national identity or society. Director Dr. Slavica Gajdzis-Knežević, who is publicly supporting the LGBTQI+ community as a mother of gay son, was publicly vilified, even leading to the organisation’s municipal funding support to be questioned. This pattern of turning support for inclusive education into a scandal reflects broader efforts to intimidate professionals and erode public trust in inclusive social services.

The attacks recorded in this reporting period demonstrate how these tactics of harassment, silencing and censorship operate in practice, targeting both individuals and institutions, and illustrate the growing risks faced by those who defend inclusive values and human rights in North Macedonia. Such attacks on fundamental freedoms do not align with EU values.

A study conducted by Coalition Margins¹⁵² sheds light on the scope and severity of this issue. Over the course of just thirteen months (from 1 June 2023, to 30 June 2024) anti-gender actors published 209 articles aimed explicitly at discrediting and harassing individual defenders and CSOs. This alarming statistic shows how well-orchestrated anti-gender groups can be, since this rate of publication is too high for individual activists or civil society to react to, as reactions require time and resources. These articles were often distributed through coordinated networks of far-right blogs, Facebook pages, and pseudo-media outlets, employing sensationalist headlines, doctored images, and conspiracy-laden narratives. Additionally, the research found that 67% of HRDs had experienced some form of harassment or violence in connection to their work over the past four years. The most prevalent form reported was online harassment, ranging from cyberbullying and misogynistic slurs to coordinated threats, experienced by more than half of all respondents. Many described a sustained pattern of digital abuse designed to humiliate and isolate them,

often triggered after public appearances or media statements. Others recounted incidents of in-person harassment, including shouting, swearing, and intimidation in public spaces, which contributed to a constant sense of surveillance and vulnerability. Intimidation through institutional pressure and the threat of legal action, while less common, were nonetheless cited as serious deterrents to public engagement. A smaller number of individuals reported experiencing doxxing, stalking, and reputational attacks that spread into their professional and personal lives.

What unites these experiences is their targeted nature: the majority of respondents indicated that they were attacked specifically because of their advocacy; 34% of (W)HRDs stated they were targeted due to their work on LGBTQI+ rights; 23% were targeted for their work on women’s rights; and 15% for their work on GBV prevention. These figures reveal a clear pattern, namely that activists who challenge patriarchal norms, speak openly about sexuality and identity, or support marginalised groups, are systematically singled out as threats by anti-gender actors. Research findings reveal not solely isolated incidents, but a pattern of deliberate, sustained efforts to delegitimise and intimidate those advocating for equality and human rights. What emerges is a shrinking civic space where WHRDs and activists are expected to endure hostility without meaningful institutional support. Ensuring their safety now requires more than legal guarantees, it demands a political and societal commitment to confront the forces that seek to silence them.

The impact of such attacks goes far beyond individual distress and have serious consequences on activists. Many defenders expressed that the cumulative effect of harassment led to self-censorship, fear for personal safety, and withdrawal from public forums. Others emphasised the psychological toll, including anxiety, exhaustion, and burnout. In a context where institutions rarely respond adequately, and where law enforcement and judiciary often fail to act against perpetrators, this sustained campaign of intimidation threatens to dismantle the fragile infrastructure of human rights advocacy in the country.

152 Cvetković, I., and Velichkovska, M., ‘Тишина меѓу редови: Безбедноста на бранителките на човекови права’, Coalition Margins, Skopje, 2024, https://coalition.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Tishina-megju-redovi_compressed.pdf, (Accessed 28 October 2025).

Serbia

Serbia's civic space rating was downgraded from Narrowed to Obstructed by CIVICUS in 2019, reflecting increased state repression, including NGO raids, surveillance of activists, and smear campaigns against civil society and independent media. This status was reaffirmed in 2025,¹⁵³ highlighting a continued decline in democratic space and institutional hostility toward dissent.

The legal and political environment for civil society in Serbia has become increasingly repressive, marked by a sustained pattern of harassment, intimidation, and attacks against (W)HRDs, journalists, and CSOs. While Serbia's formal legal framework guarantees freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, in practice these rights are routinely undermined by both state and non-state actors.

HRDs, especially women, LGBTQI+ activists, and those working on sensitive issues such as transitional justice, war crime accountability, corruption, and environmental protection, operate in a climate of hostility and fear.¹⁵⁴ They are regularly targeted through smear campaigns orchestrated by pro-government media and high-level officials, who label them as „traitors“ or „foreign mercenaries“. ¹⁵⁵ These narratives are not only discrediting but also dangerous, with the risk of inciting public animosity and violence. Verbal harassment is often accompanied by physical attacks, surveillance, vandalism, and even arson. WHRDs in small communities, or those working on war crime accountability and the rights of migrants and trafficking victims/survivors, face additional risks and isolation.

In Serbia, the reporting period saw a surge of mass protests sparked by the tragic collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy on 1 November

2024, which killed 16 people and exposed deep-rooted corruption. These demonstrations, initially led by students, rapidly expanded to over 400 towns and cities, demanding accountability, judicial transparency, and systemic reform.¹⁵⁶ The movement grew into the largest civic mobilisation in recent decades and evolved into an anti-corruption platform with broad societal backing. However, State response has featured excessive police force, arbitrary detentions on a mass scale, including of students and WHRDs, and the use of SLAPP lawsuits and other legal reprisals to suppress dissent.¹⁵⁷ Violence against protesters, particularly women protesters, journalists, and academics, has reached alarming and unprecedented levels. The scale of attacks became so vast that systematic counting and listing of incidents, which was the methodology used in the previous editions of *Women's Rights in Western Balkans*, was no longer feasible. During the reporting period, WHRDs faced a spectrum of intimidation and abuse, ranging from radical forms of physical assault and police brutality to sexist harassment and orchestrated smear campaigns. These patterns illustrate not only the intensity of repression but also its distinctly gendered character. A more detailed examination of these dynamics is provided in the In-Focus section of this report (see: *In Focus: Student protests in Serbia from a gender perspective*).

This shrinking space for civil society goes beyond attacks on protesters. The monitored and mapped cases in this report illustrate that the shrinking space for civil society extends beyond attacks on protesters, pointing to ongoing patterns of restriction. Throughout the reporting period, numerous cases arose where personal data of activists had been published in tabloids.¹⁵⁸ Women and LGBTQI+ defenders are especially vulnerable,

153 CIVICUS, 'CIVICUS Monitor – Serbia: Watchlist March 2025', CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, Johannesburg, 2025, <https://monitor.civicus.org/watchlist-march-2025/Serbia/>, (Accessed 28 October 2025).

154 Front Line Defenders, 'Serbia', Front Line Defenders, Dublin, 2025, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/location/serbia>, (accessed 28 October 2025)

155 *Ibid.*

155 Mašina, 'Protesti u više od 400 mesta u Srbiji', Mašina, 6 March 2025, <https://www.masina.rs/protesti-u-vise-od-400-mesta-u-srbiji/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

157 CIVICUS, 'People Power Under Attack 2024: Global Findings', CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, Johannesburg, 2024 <https://civicusmonitor.contentfiles.net/media/documents/GlobalFindings2024.EN.pdf>, (Accessed 28 October 2025).

158 Balkan Civil Society Development Network, 'Civic Space Report 2024 - Western Balkans', European Civic Forum, 2025, <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-WESTERN-BALKANS.pdf>, (Accessed 23 October 2025).

often being subjected to misogynistic, sexualised, and discriminatory rhetoric.

The European Parliament adopted the *Resolution on the Polarisation and Increased Repression in Serbia, One Year after the Novi Sad Tragedy*¹⁵⁹ that strongly condemns Serbia's deteriorating human rights situation, with a particular focus on women's rights and gender equality. The resolution denounced the government's suspension of the Law on Gender Equality, framing it as a serious breach of EU values and a significant obstacle to Serbia's EU accession. The law remains suspended at the time of writing this report. The Resolution also underscores a pattern of repression marked by illegal surveillance, intimidation, and arbitrary detention of activists, journalists, students, and protesters, many of whom are engaged in defending democracy and women's rights. The European Parliament further emphasised that this authoritarian turn has had a disproportionate impact on women and girls, who face heightened exposure to violence, harassment, and discrimination amid the rollback of legal protections. Particularly troubling is the public disclosure of personal data and the proliferation of hate speech targeting women and minorities, which together deepen insecurity and reinforce gender-based inequalities in Serbia's already shrinking civic space.¹⁶⁰

This vulnerability becomes even more evident when examining initiatives such as the Pride Caravan that travelled across the country, where women and queer activists faced direct hostility and institutional neglect in smaller Serbian cities. The Pride Caravan¹⁶¹ sought to decentralise queer visibility across Serbia, reaching cities such as Niš, Leskovac, Kragujevac, Kruševac, and later Čačak and Užice. The initiative aimed to bring messages of solidarity, support, and recognition to LGBTQI+ communities in the country's provinces, under

the unifying slogan „For the family,” reframing “family values” around love and inclusion rather than traditional, patriarchal values. Despite its peaceful intent, the Caravan was met with hostility and violence. Organisers reported receiving more than 1,000 threats and insults,¹⁶² including explicit death threats, after announcing visits to Niš and Leskovac. These threats triggered urgent appeals to prosecutors and the police for protective measures.

While the events in Niš and Leskovac ultimately went ahead under police security, in Kruševac, the outcome was markedly different. On the evening the caravan was scheduled to arrive, organisers received a verbal ban from the local police, citing the presence of “hooligans and fans equipped with dangerous objects” at the intended venue.¹⁶³ Despite the event being lawfully registered, the authorities refused to guarantee the safety of participants, forcing the cancellation of the event.¹⁶⁴ This move was widely criticised by the organisers, CSOs Da se zna! and Women Association Sandglass, which condemned the decision as a capitulation to violence and a violation of civic rights. These incidents underscore how queer and WHRDs operating outside major urban centres are uniquely vulnerable, not just to street-level violence, but also to institutional gatekeeping and suppression of civic expression.

Following the Pride Caravan, the Pride Parade took place in Belgrade on 6 September 2025, under heavy police presence, reflecting both the risks faced by participants and the broader political climate. Belgrade Pride 2025 was held from 1–7 September, with the central march on 6 September under the slogan “For the Family.” This year's programme was more protest-oriented than in previous years, with fewer concerts and greater emphasis on speeches by LGBTI+ activists, students, and victims/survivors of police brutality.

159 European Parliament, ‘Resolution of 7 May 2025 on the 2023 and 2024 Commission Reports on Serbia (2025/2022(INI))’, European Parliament, Brussels, 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0093_EN.pdf, (Accessed 28 October 2025).

160 Women Against Violence Europe – WAVE, ‘WAVE Statement on the Escalating Repression in Serbia’, Women Against Violence Europe – WAVE, 16 July 2025, <https://wave-network.org/wave-statement-on-the-escalating-repression-in-serbia/#:~:text=We%20demand%20the%20immediate%20reinstatement,be%20protected%E2%80%94now%20and%20always.&text=Empowering%20Women,Ending%20Violence.>, (accessed 07 November 2025).

161 Maksimovic, M., ‘Prajd karavan: Stiže LGBT lajkovačkom prugom’, VRME, 21 July 2025, <https://vreme.com/drustvo/prajd-karavan-stize-lgbt-lajkovackom-prugom/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

162 Marković, N., ‘Pretnje smrću aktivistima Prajd karavana na jugu Srbije’, Vreme, 18 July 2025, <https://vreme.com/drustvo/zbog-pretnji-smrcu-ugrozena-sigurnost-aktivistima-prajd-karavana-na-jugu-srbije/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

163 Da se zna!, ‘Police Ban Pride Caravan in Kruševac’, Da se zna!, Belgrade, 9 August 2025, <https://dasezna.lgbt/policija-zabranila-prajd-karavan-u-krusevcu/>, (Accessed 28 October 2025).

164 Danas, ‘Udruženje “Da se zna!”: Policija zabranila Prajd karavan u Kruševcu’, Danas, 9 August 2025, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/udruzenje-da-se-zna-policija-zabranila-prajd-karavan-u-krusevcu/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).



„Да се примени владавина права“/“Rule of law to be applied” banner, International Women's Day 2025, Belgrade, Serbia; Photo Lara Končar

Organisers framed the march as a political act of resistance and solidarity rather than a festival. Despite being officially authorised, the 2025 Pride Parade unfolded in a charged atmosphere marked by visible security concerns. Following the Pride Parade, two visitors from Turkey who had travelled to join the march were attacked during the event. While these accounts circulated on social media and within activist networks, they have not yet been confirmed by mainstream media or official sources.

The shift in tone and schedule, from a more festival-style approach to a protest-oriented format, together with security measures and the broader political climate, indicates that the space for LGBTQI+ expression in Belgrade is under

pressure, with participants voicing concerns about risks of violence, institutional constraints, and hostile public reactions.

During the reporting period, the Serbian state has not adequately addressed the context of severely shrinking civic space. Investigative journalists uncovered that public funds are often distributed to government-organised non-governmental organisations (known as GONGOs), phantom organisations¹⁶⁵ or religious groups closely aligned with the ruling regime, through opaque processes, marginalising critical voices and undermining the integrity of civil society. For example, in the aftermath of the two mass shootings in two days that took place in May 2023, Serbia's Education Ministry swiftly allocated €430,000 to various CSOs

¹⁶⁵ The term “phantom organisation” refers to a registered organisation that exists primarily on paper, often without a physical presence or staff. In many cases, phantom organisations receive public funds but do not implement any activities or provide services with those funds.

for violence prevention workshops. However, an investigation by BIRN estimated that 20% of the funds, roughly €90,000, went to “phantom organisations,”¹⁶⁶ each receiving approximately €15,000, despite having no public presence, employees, or verifiable contact information.¹⁶⁷

Despite sporadic progress in aligning national legislation with EU standards, recent legal changes, including worrying amendments to defamation provisions in the Criminal Code, have contributed to a broader regional backslide on freedom of expression.¹⁶⁸ Coupled with the lack of effective institutional safeguards and the impunity of perpetrators, the Serbian civic space is being systematically eroded.

In addition to physical intimidation and smear campaigns, Serbian authorities have increasingly turned to digital repression as a method of silencing dissent. In recent years, and particularly during the reporting period, investigative reports have uncovered systematic surveillance of journalists, HRDs, environmental activists, and pro-democracy actors through state-sponsored spyware.¹⁶⁹ In a joint statement released on 3 September 2024,¹⁷⁰ a coalition of CSOs led by Centre for Democracy & Technology Europe underscored the urgent threat posed by commercial spyware to democratic values, free expression and civic space across the EU and beyond. The statement argues that modern spyware tools, capable of covertly interfering with communications, eroding privacy rights and enabling targeted surveillance of journalists, activists and civil society actors, are fundamentally incompatible with the rights and standards enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and other human-rights frameworks. It calls

on EU institutions to adopt a coherent regulatory framework including bans on the production and deployment of such technologies, tighter export controls, and transparent oversight of government contracts with surveillance vendors. A 2024 Amnesty International report¹⁷¹ revealed that police and intelligence services used advanced tools, including integrating applications such as Cellebrite’s mobile forensics products and a domestic spyware known as *NoviSpy*, into mobile phones to surveil journalists and (W) HRDs without legal justification. Phones were often accessed while in police custody, enabling the covert installation of spyware that captured private data, screenshots, and even activated microphones. Victims who have had such applications embedded into their mobile devices by the police reported being left traumatised and fearful, leading to self-censorship. Despite the evidence, authorities denied wrongdoing, further highlighting the lack of oversight and judicial protection. This practice reflects a broader pattern of state control over dissent and contributes to the hostile environment in which Serbian civil society operates. It is noted that digital surveillance and digital violence perpetrated by the government against student activists and civil society escalated significantly since November 2024 and the start of the student-led protests in Serbia.

Serbia is among the top countries in the Western Balkans when it comes to the number of SLAPP lawsuits,¹⁷² with journalists, media outlets, activists, and CSOs as frequent targets, according to the CASE Coalition. Environmental defenders are particularly vulnerable, often facing lawsuits simply for organising protests or raising public awareness.

166 Ghost organisations refer to those that are registered as organisations but have no public presence, no verifiable contact information, and presumably as a result, no actual or official employees. They are often obscure or ambiguous and serve as an apparatus to receive funding for projects despite being conclusively difficult to authenticate.

167 Andric, G., ‘School Scam: The Phantom Organisations Hoovering up Serbian Public Money’, Balkan Insight, Belgrade, 6 March 2025, <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/03/06/school-scam-the-phantom-organisations-hoovering-up-serbian-public-money/>, (Accessed 28 October 2025).

168 Balkan Civil Society Development Network, ‘Civic Space Report 2024 - Western Balkans’, European Civic Forum, 2025, <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-WESTERN-BALKANS.pdf>, (accessed 23 October 2025).

169 *Ibid.*

170 Center for Democracy & Technology – CDT, et al., ‘Civil Society Joint Statement on the Use of Surveillance Spyware in the EU and Beyond’, Center for Democracy & Technology – CDT, 03 September 2024, Government Surveillance, <https://cdt.org/insights/civil-society-joint-statement-on-the-use-of-surveillance-spyware-in-the-eu-and-beyond/>, (accessed 07 November 2025).

171 Henley, J., ‘Serbian authorities using spyware to illegally surveil activists, report finds’, The Guardian, 16 December 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/16/serbian-authorities-using-spyware-to-illegally-surveil-activists-report-finds>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

172 Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe – CASE, ‘SLAPPs: Increasingly Threatening Democracy in Europe – 2023 Update Report’, Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe – CASE, Brussels, 2023, <https://www.the-case.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/20230703-CASE-UPDATE-REPORT-2023-1.pdf>, (Accessed 28 October 2025).

The escalating use of abusive legal tactics in Serbia has further threatened media freedom, with investigative outlets like the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK) being among the primary targets. In 2024, KRIK lost two key SLAPP cases,¹⁷³ marking the first final rulings against them by the Appeal Court.

Raids and institutional harassment of civil society in Serbia has also been noticed in 2025. Namely, on 25 February 2025, Serbian authorities conducted coordinated raids on six prominent CSOs: Civic Initiatives, CRTA, Trag Foundation, the Center for Practical Politics, the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM), and the National Youth Council of Serbia. Carried out without prior notice or search warrants, the raids were ordered by the High Prosecutor's Office under vague allegations of money laundering and misuse of USAID funds.¹⁷⁴ The affected organisations learned of the accusations not through official channels but via pro-government tabloids, further suggesting a deliberate smear campaign. The raids, ordered by the Public Prosecutor's Office, were justified using public statements from U.S. President Donald Trump and Elon Musk,¹⁷⁵ despite no formal request from U.S. institutions.

In 2024 and 2025, Serbia experienced a surge in violence against protesters. The Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia documented over 60 incidents,¹⁷⁶ including physical assaults, vehicular attacks, and threats involving weapons. These violent attacks occurred across various cities, often during peaceful demonstrations and blockades, highlighting a widespread pattern of intimidation aimed at suppressing civic activism.

Since the beginning of the student-led protests, pro-government media, supported by high-ranking officials and members of the ruling party, portrayed CSOs as foreign-backed agents plotting a "coloured revolution." This narrative intensified following a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs report referencing U.S. support for Serbian human rights groups, despite lacking evidence.¹⁷⁷ CSOs condemned these attacks as an attempt to delegitimise grassroots environmental activism. A special television segment aired by Informer on 20 August 2024 targeted leading CSOs like the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, CRTA, and YUCOM, using non-public data and outright fabrications. In parallel, dozens of activists across Serbia, many of whom were not public figures, were detained, had their homes searched, and faced serious charges like "attempting to overthrow the constitutional order."

The escalation of these tactics has been seen on 15 March 2025, in Belgrade. During a silent anti-government protest in Belgrade, Serbian authorities were accused of deploying a sonic weapon, specifically, a Long-Range Acoustic Device (LRAD).¹⁷⁸ Protesters described an overwhelming sound resembling a „deep roar” or „jet engine,” which triggered panic, nausea, hearing loss, and disorientation among the crowd.¹⁷⁹ Initially denying any use of sonic weapons, Serbian officials later confirmed that LRADs had been procured in 2021 without legal basis, but insisted they were not deployed during the demonstration. Despite these claims, the incident raised serious human rights concerns and prompted calls for independent investigations into the use of force and the chilling effect such weapons

173 Civil Rights Defenders, 'Standing with KRIK against abusive legal tactics', Civil Rights Defenders, Stockholm, 21 June 2024, <https://crd.org/2024/06/21/standing-with-krik-against-abusive-legal-tactics/>, (Accessed 28 October 2025).

174 Balkan Civil Society Development Network, 'BCSDN Condemns targeted institutional pressure on civic initiatives and civil society in Serbia', Balkan Civil Society Development Network, Brussels, 31 January 2025, <https://balkanncsd.net/bcsdn-condemns-targeted-institutional-pressure-on-civic-initiatives-and-civil-society-in-serbia/>, (Accessed 28 October 2025).

175 Više javno tužilaštvo u Beogradu, 'Saopštenje – 11. jula 2025', Više javno tužilaštvo u Beogradu, Belgrade, 11 July 2025, <https://beograd.vjt.rs/aktuelnosti/saopstenje-915/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

176 Milosavljević, I., Marković, S., and Ćurčić, T., 'MAPA: Napadi na učesnike protesta i blokada', CINS, Belgrade, Centar za istraživačko novinarstvo Srbije, 23 January 2025, <https://www.cins.rs/mapa-napadi-na-ucesnike-protesta-i-blokada/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

177 Ćurčić, T., 'Serbian CSOs condemn the newest campaign against civil society in pro-government media', European Western Balkans, 26 August 2024, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/08/26/serbian-csos-condemn-the-newest-campaign-against-civil-society-in-pro-government-media/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

178 N1 Belgrade, 'Earshot confirms use of sonic weapon at protest', N1, 17 March 2025, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/earshot-confirms-use-of-sonic-weapon-at-protest/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

179 Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability – CRTA, 'The European Court of Human Rights has requested that the Republic of Serbia submit a statement by March 31 regarding the alleged use of sonic weapons during the protest in Belgrade on March 15', Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability – CRTA, Belgrade, 25 March 2025, <https://cрта.rs/en/the-european-court-of-human-rights-statement-regarding-the-alleged-use-of-sonic-weapons-during-the-protest/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

have on peaceful assembly. The findings of an investigation conducted by CSO Earshot, which conducts sonic investigations for communities affected by corporate, state, and environmental injustice, concluded that it is highly likely that protesters were subjected to a targeted attack using a directional acoustic weapon, likely an LRAD.¹⁸⁰ CSOs A 11 – Initiative for Economic and Social Rights and YUCOM filed applications on behalf of 47 affected individuals to the ECtHR, prompting the court to issue interim measures. On 30 April 2025, the ECtHR issued an interim measure ordering Serbia to prevent any future use of sonic weapons or similar devices for crowd control. The measure did not determine whether such weapons were used on 15 March 2025, but noted that 47 Serbian nationals had submitted complaints, and that up to 4,000 individuals

reported experiencing symptoms, from panic and nausea to hearing problems, during the Belgrade protest. The ECtHR emphasised that such devices are unlawful in Serbia and carry potentially serious health risks.¹⁸¹ It is also important to note that a European Parliament resolution explicitly referred to the ECtHR order regarding sonic devices and called on Serbia to fully respect the interim measure, refrain from using such devices, and uphold EU values of human rights and rule of law as part of Serbia's accession process.¹⁸²

Together, these cases reveal a coordinated erosion of civic space in Serbia, where intimidation, surveillance, and legal abuse are used to silence dissent. Both overt crackdowns and subtle forms of repression are endangering human rights and democratic freedoms.

180 Abu Hamdan, L., et al., 'Sonic attack on a silent vigil', Earshot, 2025, <https://earshot.ngo/investigations/sonic-attack-on-a-silent-vigil>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

181 Serbian Times, 'UN Persists: New demands for official response from Serbia regarding alleged use of sound cannon!', Serbian Times, 6 June 2025, <https://serbiantimes.info/en/un-persists-new-demands-for-official-response-from-serbia-regarding-alleged-use-of-sound-cannon/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

182 European Parliament, 'Resolution of 7 May 2025 on the 2023 and 2024 Commission Reports on Serbia (2025/2022(INI))', European Parliament, Brussels, 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0093_EN.pdf, (accessed 28 October 2025).

In Focus: student protests in Serbia from a gender perspective

In 2024 and 2025 a wave of massive student-led protests occurs in Serbia. The immediate trigger was the 1 November 2024 collapse of the newly renovated canopy of Novi Sad railway station, which killed 16 people and became a shorthand for corruption, preferential and favour-based contracting, unfair procurement practices, and institutional negligence. Within weeks, students began organising daily “Serbia, stop” silent 16-minute blockades which begin at 11:52, the exact time of the canopy collapse, and end at 12:08, with each minute representing a moment of silence for one of the victims. At the time of writing this report, hundreds of cities and villages in Serbia have recorded having blockades and protests. A key inflection point came on 22 November, when a coordinated group of enforcers, one of which was identified as an SNS party member,¹⁸³ attacked students from Belgrade’s Faculty of Dramatic Arts during one such silent tribute, in response to which students occupied campuses and corresponding daily blockades¹⁸³ spread nationwide. The crisis resulted in high-level resignations, including then-Prime Minister Miloš Vučević,¹⁸⁵ which was formalised by parliament in mid-March 2025.

What came before, however, also matters. In recent years, the country had already seen mass-scale opposition protests around the disputed December 2023 elections¹⁸⁶ and the 2023 “Serbia Against Violence” mobilisations following the two mass shootings in two days.¹⁸⁷ The canopy disaster

and the orchestrated violence against student protesters in the days following it were what concentrated civic anger among students, who then set the pace for a broader anti-corruption front through decentralised, self-governing structures within the occupied universities country-wide.

By scale and duration, the student protests are unprecedented in recent decades. After early campus occupations, a massive student-called rally on 22 December 2024 packed Belgrade’s Slavija Square¹⁸⁸ (estimates ranged from “tens of thousands” to approximately 100,000). Protests radiated to Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac, and Novi Pazar with rolling road blockades and even 24-hour junction shutdowns in Belgrade. A new peak came on 15 March 2025 with over 325,000 people attending Serbia’s largest recorded protest.¹⁸⁹ Additionally, from mid-April, students blockaded the public broadcaster *Radio Television Serbia* (RTS) for two weeks to protest biased reporting, only ending the action after concession from authorities to restart the appointment process for the Council of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media. This action highlighted the centrality of media capture and bias, situating attacks on women journalists within a context of wider struggle for press freedom and accountability. On 28 June 2025,¹⁹⁰ an independent monitor estimated approximately 140,000 people in Belgrade - a protest that sparked a long period of mass arrests and an intensified crackdown of

183 Milovanović, T., ‘Identifikovani nasilnici koji su napadali studente i novinare ispred FDU: Među njima Milija Koldžić i ostali aktivisti i funkcioneri SNS’, Nova.rs, 18 December 2024, <https://nova.rs/vesti/hronika/identifikovani-nasilnici-koji-su-napadali-studente-i-novinare-ispred-fdu-medju-nima-milija-koldzic-i-ostali-aktivisti-i-funkcioneri-sns/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

184 Sekularac, I., ‘Serbian students block classes to protest roof collapse deaths’, Reuters, 6 December 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbian-students-block-classes-protest-roof-collapse-deaths-2024-12-06/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

185 Gec, J., ‘Serbia’s prime minister resigns as anti-corruption protests sparked by deadly collapse swell’, AP News, 28 January 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/serbia-protests-vucevic-resigns-b71e3a0aacf5d0368b2bd1f4500170f5>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

186 Sekularac, I., ‘Thousands protest in Belgrade to demand annulment of elections’, Reuters, 26 December 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/thousands-protest-belgrade-demand-elections-annulled-2023-12-24/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

187 Cvijić, S., ‘Just another protest or the beginning of the end of Vučić’s reign?’, European Western Balkans, 17 June 2023, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/06/17/just-another-protest-or-the-beginning-of-the-end-of-vucics-reign/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

188 Stojanovic, M., ‘Mass Rally Blocks Serbia’s Capital Demanding Accountability for Station Disaster’, BalkanInsight, 23 December 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/12/23/mass-rally-blocks-serbias-capital-demanding-accountability-for-station-disaster/>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

189 De Launey, G., ‘Serbia’s largest-ever rally sees 325,000 protest against government’, BBC, 16 March 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2g8v32q30o>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

190 Gec, J., ‘Dozens of anti-government protesters detained during clashes with riot in police in Serbia’, AP News, 29 June 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/serbia-protest-students-elections-vucic-5b3825302a59991c4ad4046c80e7ce45>, (accessed 28 October 2025).

police brutality. The crackdown resulted in a new wave of arrests and detentions of students and active citizens, while protesters responded by organising new road blockades in the capital and other cities. In the days that followed, detentions continued, with dozens held in custody, marking a further intensification of the cycle of repression and resistance.¹⁹¹

With the country in an ongoing state of political unrest, as of September 2025, demonstrations and blockades have persisted for roughly ten months, with the country in something resembling a state of emergency, though not officially declared as such.

The student protests quickly spread beyond Belgrade, reaching dozens of cities, towns, and even smaller villages across Serbia. Students often chose to walk or travel by bicycle as a way to mobilise communities along the way.¹⁹² These grassroots “protest marches on foot” became a hallmark of the movement, drawing in local residents who otherwise might not have participated. A particularly emblematic action was the “bicycle tour to Strasbourg”,¹⁹³ when a group of students cycled from Serbia to the European Parliament to internationalise their demands and denounce the corruption and negligence that had triggered the protests in the first place. In places such as Novi Pazar, the protests also carried an additional meaning, wherein Orthodox and Muslim students marched together, demonstrating rare inter-ethnic solidarity and affirming that corruption, state violence, and institutional decay were shared concerns that cut across ethnic and religious divides. This strategy of mobility, by foot, by relay marathon, by bike, across regions, helped sustain the protests for months and kept them visible across the entire country. According to Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE),¹⁹⁴ these protests have been met with police brutality, arbitrary arrests and intimidation, measures that disproportionately affect women students, activists and feminist organisations already working in an eroding

civic space. As women-led and gender-sensitive activism gains visibility within the protest movement, WAVE reports that the repression they face underscores how gender intersects with generational and democratic struggles in Serbia's shifting political landscape.

From a gender perspective, women have been both organisers and targets. Women students led the International Women's Day rally and explicitly linked anti-corruption demands with women's safety and dignity (including responses to sexist remarks by officials). At the same time, documented incidents include police violence and mistreatment of women students during many protests. At the outset of the protests, activists and (W)CSOs began documenting incidents of harassment and violence against women. Yet as the movement grew, the scale, intensity, and overall frequency of the violence escalated so dramatically, both in frequency and severity, that it became impossible to count or systematically record all cases.

In March 2025, Marija Vasić, deputy chair of the Free Citizens' Movement (PSG) in Novi Sad and a high-school sociology teacher, was arrested alongside five student activists under unlawfully obtained audio evidence of “attempting to overthrow the constitutional order”. The case relied on an edited audio recording selectively broadcast on regime-owned media, framing activists' conversations about protests as evidence of conspiracy. Vasić spent more than two months in arbitrary detention without formal charges and was denied consistent access to family and legal counsel. On 13 May, she declared a hunger and thirst strike, refusing even IV fluids to protest her unlawful incarceration. Her health quickly deteriorated, requiring hospitalisation, yet authorities refused her release or independent medical oversight. As a result, international pressure escalated, and on 20 May 2025, the European Parliament adopted an urgent resolution naming Vasić and the detained students, demanding their release

191 Radio Slobodna Evropa, ‘Sukob policije i demonstranata nakon protesta u centru Beograda’, Radio Slobodna Evropa, 29 June 2025, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/sukob-policija-demonstranti-vidovdan-protesti/33457900.html>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

192 Mašina, ‘Students march hundreds of kilometres to celebrate the First Serbian Uprising’, Mašina, 13 February 2025, <https://www.masina.rs/eng/students-march-hundreds-of-kilometers-to-celebrate-the-first-serbian-uprising/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

193 Baltic, K., ‘Serbian Students Bring Protest Cause to Strasbourg After Bicycle Marathon’, BalkanInsight, 16 April 2025, <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/04/16/serbian-students-bring-protest-cause-to-strasbourg-after-bicycle-marathon/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

194 Women Against Violence Europe – WAVE, ‘WAVE Statement on the Escalating Repression in Serbia’, Women Against Violence Europe – WAVE, 16 July 2025, <https://wave-network.org/wave-statement-on-the-escalating-repression-in-serbia/#:~:text=We%20demand%20the%20immediate%20reinstatement,be%20protected%E2%80%94now%20and%20always.&text=Empowering%20Women,Ending%20Violence.>, (accessed 07 November 2025).

and independent monitoring of politically sensitive trials.¹⁹⁵ Beyond detention, Vasić faced gendered smear campaigns in state-aligned tabloids such as *Informer*, which labelled her a “radical conspirator” and “terrorist” and used sexualised insults to discredit her authority as a leader and educator.

Throughout the student-led protests in Serbia, WHRDs were repeatedly targeted through physical violence and public smear campaigns. One notable form of violence that women experienced took place on public streets where in several instances cars drove into crowds to disperse protesters – in three out of four instances, women were the victims/survivors of this form of violence.¹⁹⁶ The first of such attacks took place on 16 January 2025, during a then-15-minute blockade¹⁹⁷ at the intersection of Ruzveltova and Kraljice Marije streets in Belgrade, a car drove at high speed into a crowd of demonstrators, striking student Sonja Ponjavić who was standing on the sidewalk.¹⁹⁸ She was carried on the hood before falling to the ground, while the vehicle sped away. Prosecutors raised charges of attempted murder against the driver. Just over a week later, on 24 January 2025, during the nationwide protest, within the first student-organised General Strike, in New Belgrade, another driver accelerated into a group of student marshals, injuring Kristina Vasiljević who sustained head injuries.¹⁹⁹ Authorities later reclassified the offense from a violent crime to “causing general danger” and President Vučić controversially granted a pardon to the perpetrator. In another case, a woman participant of a blockade and a doctor from

the Institute for Mental Health was hit by a car during a peaceful then-15-minute blockade near their clinic.²⁰⁰

On 19 August 2025, philosophy student Teodora Gardović was subjected to a staged public arrest while riding a Belgrade city bus.²⁰¹ Several plainclothes officers boarded without presenting a warrant, forcibly removed her in front of passengers, and took her to a police station, where she was held overnight. The following day at the Palace of Justice, she was accused of violent behaviour at a public gathering and for vandalising the SNS headquarters on Cvijićeva Street. Gardović denied the charges, explaining she carried only a bottle of water and had not engaged in violence or property damage. By 20 August, the charges were downgraded to a misdemeanour, and she was released. Her lawyer described the operation as a “spectacular police action” intended to intimidate students and protesters rather than uphold public order. In another two separate incidents, young women protesters were run over by vehicles that drove into the crowds during the street blockades to pay tribute to those who were killed.²⁰² In Novi Sad, a student placing posters near the ruling SNS Party's premises was violently attacked by masked assailants wielding batons, leaving her with a broken jaw. In a controversial move, President Aleksandar Vučić publicly referred to the attackers as “heroes” and proceeded to pardon the four individuals involved, effectively shielding them from legal accountability and signalling impunity for politically motivated violence.²⁰³ On 30 June 2025, students published a video on social media showing police officers making sexually suggestive

195 European Parliament, ‘Resolution of 7 May 2025 on the 2023 and 2024 Commission Reports on Serbia (2025/2022(INI))’, European Parliament, Brussels, 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0093_EN.pdf, (accessed 28 October 2025).

196 EPride Caravan Serbia, [‘Post showing Pride Caravan event in Kruševac’], Instagram, 9 August 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DH0d53mMzxB/?img_index=3, (accessed 28 October 2025).

197 Blockades have since increased to 16 minutes in length, to mark the 16th fatality which took place after the time of this blockade when the death toll was 15.

198 N1 Beograd, ‘Određen pritvor do 30 dana osumnjičenom koji je pregazio studentkinju u Ruzveltovoj ulici’, N1info, 18 January 2025, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/odredjen-pritvor-do-30-dana-osumnjicenom-koji-je-pregazio-studentkinju-u-ruzveltovoj-ulici/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

199 Mladenović, J., ‘Privedena devojka koja je udarila studentkinju u Jurija Gagarina na Novom Beogradu’, Nova.rs, 24 January 2025, <https://nova.rs/vesti/hronika/privedena-devojka-koja-je-udarila-studentkinju-u-jurija-gagarina-na-novom-beogradu/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

200 Marković, A., ‘Na blokadi kod Palmotić automobilom udareno dvoje lekara VIDEO’, Nova.rs, 31 January 2025, <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/na-blokadi-kod-palmoticeve-automobilom-udareno-dvoje-lekara/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

201 VREME, ‘Puštena na slobodu studentkinja koja je uhapšena u autobusu’, VREME, 20 August 2025, <https://vreme.com/vesti/pustena-na-slobodu-studentkinja-koja-je-uhapsena-u-autobusu/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

202 Blackburn, G., ‘Serbian students lead strike as protests against Aleksandar Vučić’s rule continue’, Euronews, 25 January 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/01/25/serbian-students-lead-strike-as-protests-against-aleksandar-vucics-rule-continue>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

203 021.rs, ‘Pomilovanje “junaka” koji su polomili vilicu studentkinji “bilo zeleno svetlo za nasilje nad građanima”’, 021.rs, 06 July 2025, <https://www.021.rs/novi-sad/vesti/414609/pomilovanje-junaka-koji-su-polomili-vilicu-studentkinji-bilo-zeleno-svetlo-za-nasilje-nad-gradjanima>, (Accessed 29 October 2025).



International Women's Day Protests 2025,
Belgrade, Serbia; Photo: Lara Končar

remarks to women students while securing a protest blockade.²⁰⁴ The footage widely circulated online exposed the gendered harassment faced by young women in civic actions. Despite the clear evidence, no response or accountability measures have been taken by the competent authorities. In addition to this violent assault, there was a disturbing case of police brutality involving a young woman from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, wherein a policeman and a policewoman, were filmed pulling her hair in an apparent attempt to extort testimony or by some accounts unlock her phone with face recognition, a clear and egregious act of brutality that quickly circulated across social media platforms. This incident further underscores the alarming erosion of civil liberties and signals a troubling trend of normalised impunity for state violence against students and protesters.²⁰⁵ The pattern of intimidation was further evident in the case of Belgrade Higher Court Judge Ksenija Marić, who faced death threats after acquitting 12 students accused of attacking law enforcement and attempting to violently overthrow the constitutional order. Following inflammatory coverage in pro-regime tabloids, social media posts openly called for her arrest and trial, forcing her to report the threats to the High-Tech Crime Prosecutor's Office.

In Novi Sad, a young woman student was physically assaulted during a protest, left bloodied with a dislocated jaw after being beaten with fists and batons.²⁰⁶ In addition to physical violence, WHRDs were subjected to slander in pro-government media: Kvinna till Kvinna and the Alternative Girls' Centre were vilified in regime media wherein a Kvinna till Kvinna staff member was named and accused of "funding the protests with foreign funds" and destabilising the country. Women in Black were attacked in *Politika* and also accused of being "foreign agents"

funding the protests. A historian and WHRD with disabilities was mocked in the tabloid *Informer*, and Serbian opposition parties were accused of manipulating and using her as a "token student with disabilities",²⁰⁷ prompting public backlash and solidarity responses from Women Civil Society Organisations (WCSOs).²⁰⁸ In August 2025, Dr. Biljana Đorđević, co-chair of the Green-Left Front (ZLF) and associate professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences, was subjected to a coordinated defamation campaign across state-aligned broadcasters *TV Prva* and *B92*, amplified by tabloids and online platforms. Rather than addressing her advocacy on environmental and social justice issues, the coverage cast her as a "foreign puppet," a "state-splitter," and a destabilising force. Her academic credentials were questioned, and insinuations about her "loyalty" and "moral integrity" were spread widely. The campaign was not aimed at policy critique but at dismantling her legitimacy as an academic, political representative, and civic leader. Unlike her men counterparts facing political attacks, the framing of Đorđević drew heavily on gendered stereotypes, depicting her as "emotionally unstable," "easily manipulated," and "used" by external actors. This gendered defamation illustrates how politically active women are punished symbolically, their reputations dismantled as a warning to others. Another example of targeted harassment occurred in Novi Sad, where a group of women activists and mothers were publicly vilified after attending a parent meeting at a local school. A tabloid published photographs of the women that were obtained from their social media and showed them in a cafe, accusing them of "drinking beer and coffee" near the school while allegedly planning a blockade, despite the gathering being a legitimate meeting of parents, and not linked to the protests.²⁰⁹

204 Stankovic, A., '[Reel showing police officers making inappropriate comments and laughing about violence during protests]', Instagram, 30 June 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DLhmKvXIfPD/?igsh=MWU4N2k4eTc5enNwcw%3D%3D>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

205 Bogdanović, N., 'Tužilaštvo istražuje, dok policija čuti nakon optužbi o maltretiranju privedene studentkinje u Beogradu', Radio Slobodna Evropa, 9 July 2025, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-beograd-studenti-fdu-hapsenje-protesti-policija-blokada/33469751.html>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

206 Kosović, S., 'Studentkinja o dva napada u Novom Sadu: Udarali ih palicama i pesnicama u glavu, studentkinji dislocirana vilica', N1, 28 January 2025, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/studentkinja-o-dva-napada-u-novom-sadu-udarali-ih-pesnicama-u-glavu-i-palicama-studentkinji-dislocirana-vilica/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

207 *Informer.rs*, 'ZNEMIRUJUĆ SNIMAK IZ RAKOVICE! Opozicija u političke svrhe koristi devojkicu sa posebnim potrebama, ona doživela napad!', *Informer.rs*, 24 January 2025, <https://informer.rs/politika/vesti/983723/snimak-rakovica-osoba-sa-posebnim-potrebama>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

208 *Informernovine*, 'Post condemning statement by Niš city council member Stevan Veselinović on autism', Instagram, 9 August 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DFXxlYIOUom/?img_index=8, (accessed 29 October 2025).

209 *Nsuzivo.rs*, 'Politički aktivisti koji blokiraju osnovne škole u novom sadu planiraju dalje blokade!', *Nsuzivo.rs*, 01 March 2025, <https://nsuzivo.rs/srbija/politicki-aktivisti-koji-blokiraju-osnovnu-skolu-u-novom-sadu-planiraju-dalje-blokade/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

Attacks go beyond activists. Women journalists in Serbia have faced systematic harassment and intimidation, both on the ground during protests and through smear campaigns and political interference in independent media. Pro-government outlets routinely frame reporters as “extremists” or “foreign agents,” while law enforcement obstructs their work and exposes them to heightened risks.

On 14 August 2025, *Zoomer* journalist Teodora Šulj was shoved by police and had her phone confiscated while filming an injured protester, despite wearing a press vest.²¹⁰ At the same protest, Ana Milosavljević of *Mašina* was physically blocked from documenting events, with officers ignoring her credentials and pushing her back more aggressively than male reporters nearby, reflecting the gendered dimension of press suppression.²¹¹ In Novi Sad, *Zoomer* reporter Marina Nenadović was struck by a thrown object and later shoved by plainclothes officers. These incidents provide some examples of how women journalists are exposed to danger from both protesters and police, without institutional protection.²¹²

Beyond protests, intimidation extends into newsrooms. On 27–28 August 2025, Ana Novaković of *N1* was obstructed at Belgrade's Hotel Bristol while investigating political interference in media. Security unlawfully confiscated her phone for 90 minutes, pressured her to delete footage, and threatened professional consequences, prompting Serbia's two largest press associations to condemn the incident.²¹³

At the editorial level, smear campaigns orchestrated by regime media further erode media independence, not least during times of

political instability in Serbia. Biljana Stepanović, Editor-in-Chief of *Nova Ekonomija*, has been repeatedly vilified in pro-government tabloids, which branded her a “foreign agent” and “saboteur” after publishing investigations into corruption.²¹⁴ Similarly, Aleksandra Subotić, Executive Director of *United Media* (operator of *N1* and *Nova S*), was targeted following the release of an Organised Crime and Reporting Project/ KRIK audio recording in which Telekom Srbija's CEO referred to a direct request from President Vučić to remove her.²¹⁵ The EU's Media Freedom Rapid Response condemned this as blatant political interference in editorial independence. In mid-2025, educator, and feminist human rights activist Dijana Dexy Stošić became the target of a coordinated smear campaign across tabloids and social media.²¹⁶ The attacks moved beyond criticism of her reporting, focusing instead on mockery of her physical appearance, reducing her to the object of public humiliation. This strategy is emblematic of how women in public life are delegitimised through gendered shaming based on their looks rather than substantive critique of their work. A striking element of this campaign was the involvement of Jelena Karleuša, a high-profile singer and celebrity with close ties to the ruling regime, who amplified derogatory narratives against Dexy, calling her degrading names based on her body. By mobilising a prominent woman figure to attack another woman's appearance, the campaign not only reinforced misogynistic discourse but also normalised public humiliation as a tool of political control. This case demonstrates how smear campaigns against women journalists are gendered by design. They weaponise stereotypes, ridicule, and appearance-based insults to undermine authority and credibility. It also underscores how authoritarian contexts co-opt cultural figures to fracture

210 N1, ‘NUNS: Increasingly brutal attacks and threats against journalists’, N1 Belgrade, 15 August 2025, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/nuns-increasingly-brutal-attacks-and-threats-against-journalists/>, (accessed 29 October 2025)

211 *Mašina*, ‘Tear Gas and Defiance: Serbia's Streets Erupt Against State Violence’, *Mašina*, 15 August 2025, <https://www.masina.rs/eng/tear-gas-and-defiance-serbias-streets-erupt-against-state-violence/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

212 N1, ‘Serbia: Attacks on journalists reach unprecedented levels amidst ongoing anti-government protests’, N1 Belgrade, 23 August 2025, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/serbia-attacks-on-journalists-reach-unprecedented-levels-amidst-ongoing-anti-government-protests/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

213 Danas, ‘Novinari N1 Nove maltretirani i u hotelu Bristol zbog pokušaja da dobiju izjavu od Stena Milera’, Danas.rs, 28 August 2025, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/novinarku-n1-pravelo-obezbedjenje-nakon-pokusaja-da-postavi-pitanja-direktoru-united-grupe-video/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

214 Ekipa Politike, ‘Odrađuje ropsku porciju čvaraka! Gospođa inkasirala 2.765.195 evra: Sad je jasno zašto je Biljana Stepanović blokaderka sa dna kace!’, *Nsuzivo.rs*, 27 August 2025, <https://nsuzivo.rs/srbija/odradjuje-ropsku-porciju-cvaraka-gospodja-inkasirala-2-765-195-evra-sad-je-jasno-zasto-je-biljana-stepanovic-blokaderka-sa-dna-kace/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

215 N1, ‘Transkript celog razgovora direktora UG i Telekom: “Moram tu kompaniju da učinim veoma malom u Srbiji”’, N1 Beograd, 28 August 2025, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/transkript-celog-razgovora-direktora-ug-i-telekoma-moram-tu-kompaniju-da-ucinim-veoma-malom-u-srbiji/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

216 Dexstosic, ‘Post expressing support for Dejana Stošić’, Instagram, 29 August 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DN8KbjTCFxm/?igsh=Qkjic1ZrQ0xVcw%3D%3D&img_index=4, (accessed 29 October 2025).

solidarity among women and silence critical voices in the media. In another case, President Aleksandar Vučić publicly insulted journalist Lidija Georgijev, calling her an “imbecile”,²¹⁷ while *Nova S* journalist Ana Marković was assaulted while reporting from the “Stop Serbia” rally.²¹⁸ Dean Natalija Jovanović of the University of Niš, who supported student blockades, was subjected to sustained harassment, all of which culminated and ultimately led to her being stabbed on 30 March 2025.²¹⁹ On 12 July 2025, Professor Smiljana Milinkov, a media scholar at the University of Novi Sad, was physically pushed to the ground by riot police while standing in solidarity with her students during a peaceful protest. The incident symbolised more than individual harm, it was an assault on academic freedom and civic solidarity, signalling that universities are not autonomous spaces and that critical academic voices can be violently silenced. Following the attack, state-aligned tabloids further delegitimised her by portraying her as a “political agitator,” erasing her professional identity and reframing her solidarity as subversion. This combination of physical repression and discursive stigmatisation illustrates how women’s authority in public life is systematically undermined. These cases illustrate how WHRDs, women journalists and academics were not only at the forefront of civic mobilisations but also exposed to retaliation and dehumanisation.²²⁰ The Serbian authorities have increasingly misused the captured media (often called “Regime Media”) to delegitimise independent organisations, especially those addressing gender, LGBTQI+ rights, peacebuilding, or environmental issues.

One of the most disturbing cases happened in July 2025 and involves Nikolina Sinđelić, a student activist and member of Narodni pokret, who was arrested during protests and subjected to brutal police violence.²²¹ During the arrest, the commander of the Special Operations Unit, Marko Kričak, repeatedly beat her, slammed her head against the wall, and threatened to rape her publicly to “teach her a lesson.” After Sinđelić spoke openly about the police brutality and rape threats she endured, Dijana Hrkalo, the former State Secretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, further escalated the abuse by sharing intimate nude photos of Sinđelić in an effort to discredit and humiliate her.²²² Crucially, these photos were taken when Sinđelić was a minor and depicted in a state of nudity, making their distribution not only non-consensual but also potentially a serious violation of child protection laws. WCSOs, including Autonomous Women’s Centre strongly condemned this act, describing it as revenge pornography and a severe violation of Sinđelić’s dignity and rights, emphasising that public debate must focus on holding perpetrators accountable rather than stigmatising the victim.²²³ This case is not an isolated incident but part of a broader pattern. Literature indicates that women’s sexuality in Serbia is increasingly weaponised as a political tool used to silence dissent, discredit women activists, and discourage others from speaking out.²²⁴ In Sinđelić’s case, intimate images were circulated to divert public debate away from the police brutality and GBV that she experienced, shifting the focus onto her body and sexuality. Such practices reveal how women’s bodies have been instrumentalised in Serbia’s political arena,

217 Media and Analyses for Press Freedom, ‘RTS journalists called “imbeciles” by Serbian President’, MAP MF, Belgrade, 2025, <https://www.mapmf.org/alert/32977>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

218 Media and Analyses for Press Freedom, ‘Serbia: Nova S journalist Ana Marković assaulted while covering the “Stop Serbia” rally near the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in New Belgrade’, MAP MF, Belgrade, 2024, <https://www.mapmf.org/alert/32364>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

219 Danas, ‘Nožem napadnuta dekanica Filozofskog fakulteta u Nišu, policija uhapsila ženu’, Danas.rs, 30 March 2025, [Nožem napadnuta dekanica Filozofskog fakulteta u Nišu, policija uhapsila ženu \(VIDEO\) - Društvo - Dnevni list Danas](https://www.danas.rs/vesti/ni/napadnuta-dekanica-filozofskog-fakulteta-u-nisu-policija-uhapsila-zenu/), (accessed 29 October 2025).

220 Pride Caravan Serbia, ‘[Post showing Pride Caravan event in Kruševac]’, Instagram, Belgrade, Pride Caravan Serbia, 9 August 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DH0d53mMzxB/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

221 Pride Caravan Serbia, ‘[Reel of Pride Caravan event]’, Instagram, Belgrade, Pride Caravan Serbia, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DNYjKoht1HO/?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet, (accessed 29 October 2025).

222 Blokada.fpn, ‘[Post showing student protest activities at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade]’, Instagram, Belgrade, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DNdROLIq7Mr/?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet, (accessed 29 October 2025).

223 N1, ‘Osvetnička pornografija i kako se žrtve nose s time: “Besmisleno je rapspravljati o tome zašto ona ima takve snimke”’, N1 Beograd, 18 August 2025, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/osvetnicka-pornografija-i-kako-se-zrtve-nose-s-tim-besmisleno-je-raspravljati-o-tome-zasto-ona-ima-takve-snimke/komentari/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

224 Cvetincanin Knezevic, H., ‘In Serbia, Women’s Sexuality is Being Weaponised to Silence Dissent’, BalkanInsight, 28 August 2025, <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/08/28/in-serbia-womens-sexuality-is-being-weaponised-to-silence-dissent/>, (accessed 29 October 2025).

not only to punish individual activists but to send a chilling message to all women who dare to dissent. By turning women's sexuality into a public battleground, authorities and their allies reinforce patriarchal control while deflecting attention from accountability for violence and corruption.

These cases reveal that gender was not incidental but instrumental to the strategies of repression deployed during the protests. Women who stepped into public space as protesters, journalists, academics, or judges were met with heightened retaliation that combined physical violence with humiliation, stigmatisation, and character assassination. Unlike indiscriminate crackdowns on gatherings, these attacks were often targeted and symbolic, aiming to discipline women's political presence by portraying them as deviant, immoral, or undeserving of public legitimacy.

The use of gendered smear campaigns, ridiculing women as "tokens," as irresponsible mothers, or as manipulated figures, functioned to undermine not only individual credibility but also the broader feminist and civic movements with which they were associated. Such narratives tap into entrenched patriarchal stereotypes, suggesting that women's public participation is inherently inappropriate or secondary, thereby reinforcing the message that dissent is both dangerous and unfeminine.

At the same time, the state's open endorsement of perpetrators – such as the Presidential pardon of the Novi Sad attackers – demonstrates a deliberate institutionalisation of impunity for gender-based political violence. This sends a dual message: first, that political violence is an acceptable tool of regime defence, and second, that women who challenge authority will be punished more harshly and more visibly. This dynamic creates a chilling effect, deterring women from civic engagement while normalising misogyny as part of authoritarian governance.

When analysing from a gender perspective, the Serbian protests illustrate how authoritarian repression intersects with patriarchal control. Gendered violence during the demonstrations was not only a tactic of silencing but also a symbolic reaffirmation of men's dominance in the public

sphere. By targeting WHRDs, women students, and women academics, the regime sought to delegitimise broader civic resistance and fracture solidarity, exposing the particular vulnerability of women in contexts where both democratic space and gender equality are under attack.

Over time, the character of the student protests in Serbia shifted in some part from liberal, left-leaning mobilisations, focused on accountability, transparency, and social justice, into incorporating nationalist and religious symbolism. The Vidovdan (St. Vitus Day) demonstration on 28 June 2025, provides a stark illustration: What had once been a secular rally for democratic reform transformed into a symbolic event, infused with national mythmaking. As one commentator put it, „When students begin to toy with nationalist narratives, to flirt with identity myths and symbols like Vidovdan, the protests cease to be expressions of political maturity and start sinking into the same ideological labyrinths that have historically led Serbia into catastrophe.”²²⁵

Nationalist language and symbolism have surfaced at particular moments, most visibly during the Vidovdan demonstration, but they do not define the protests as a whole. In Serbia, where nationalism is deeply embedded in the social fabric, such references are difficult to avoid, and in some cases they were used strategically to increase turnout. Nevertheless, even when present as undertones, nationalism has consequences: It reinforces exclusionary narratives and creates an atmosphere where women's and queer voices are sidelined. This is visible in the absence of Pride flags or queer symbols at the rallies. LGBTQI+ organisations themselves have allegedly acknowledge that these protests are not the space to push for queer liberation, but they also stress that participation is still crucial as part of the wider struggle against authoritarianism.

Although Pride flags are not visible at the student protests, Pride Parade 2025 was organised in solidarity with the broader student movement. For the first time ever, students from the Faculty of Philosophy (University of Belgrade) publicly declared their support for the LGBTQI+ community by issuing a statement²²⁶ saying that they support

225 Kladničanin, F., 'Blokada vidovdanske raskrsnice', Peščanik, 08 July 2025, <https://pescanik.net/blokada-vidovdanske-raskrsnice/> (accessed 29 October 2025).

226 Filoloski.blokada, Instagram, 06 September 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DOQX24NjMtr/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link, (accessed 29 October 2025).

the Pride Parade and many of the demands of Pride overlap with the demands students have been making.²²⁷ Following this, the students from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (University of Arts, Belgrade) issued a similar statement.²²⁸

Such actions show a growing willingness among student activists to link their demands for democracy, transparency, and justice with the struggle for LGBTQI+ rights. However, we can say that such a shift complicates the picture of resistance in Serbia: On the one hand, the protests increasingly carried undertones of nationalism, with religious and patriarchal rhetoric surfacing in

ways that sidelined feminist and gender-equality voices; On the other hand, the student movement also created space for unexpected gestures of solidarity, such as the public support for Pride by students of the Faculty of Philosophy and the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, showing that even within a contested environment, alliances between student and LGBTQI+ movements can emerge. For participating WHRDs, this means navigating contradictions within the protest movement itself, where the language of resistance could reproduce exclusionary hierarchies, but also, at key moments, open possibilities for more inclusive and transformative alliances.

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228 Blokada.fpn, Instagram, 10 September 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DObapBgClgR/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link, (accessed 29 October 2025).

Recommendations*

SECURITY FOR WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

IN BRIEF:

Attacks against WHRDs, as well as against women journalists, are under-reported and in cases where the attacks are reported, they are often not adequately addressed by the relevant institutions. No complaint and support mechanisms exist, and no systematic data is collected for evidence-based policymaking.

WITHIN ONE YEAR:

Support regional baseline research that monitors threats and attacks, assesses the nature of attacks, and evaluates reporting mechanisms.

Governments:

- Create new, or amend existing, policy documents aimed at creating a safe environment for the work of HRDs by including a definition and recognition of WHRD.
- Ensure that instances of violence and harassment in both offline and digital spaces against WHRDs are effectively investigated, adequately sanctioned and ensure gender-bias is recognised and consistently applied as an aggravating circumstance.
- Implement a requirement for national human rights institutions and gender equality bodies to collect, analyse and distribute data on attacks on WHRDs and women journalists.

EU institutions, other inter-governmental organisations and donors:

- Ensure implementation of specific policies such as the EU Human Rights Country Strategies and the EU Gender Action Plan, including an analysis of the needs and challenges of WHRDs and specific measures to address them.
- Fund research and data collection on WHRDs and women journalists in the Western Balkans to document incidents, institutional responses and applicable legal frameworks.
- Allocate funds, in consultation with HRDs and WHRDs, aimed at increasing safety and mitigating security risks, including digital security.
- Fund specific programmes to comprehensively address GBV against WHRDs, including digital harassment and violence.

* Given the diverse situation in each country, the recommendations are generalised, applying to the majority of Western Balkan countries for each recommended action.



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„Bez nas sve(t) staje“/“The world stops without us – Everything stops without us” (*Word play),
International Women's Day Protests 2025, Belgrade, Serbia; Photo: Lara Končar

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in every corner of the world.**