R2 Saving the democracy – right to protest in Eastern Europe, with emphasis on Serbia and Georgia

Organization: Executive Committee
Resolution date: 14.03.2025
Agenda item: 5. Resolutions

Resolution text

In the last couple of years we've been witnessing big backsliding of democratic values in the world, but especially in Eastern Europe. While people have responded with protests to various autocratic moves of their government, during the last few months, two protests have especially captured the attention of everyone striving for democracy around the world - the ones in Georgia and Serbia. What is concerning, however, is how the protesters, especially young ones, have been treated in both cases.

Protests in Serbia started again at the end of 2024 after the horrendous collapse of the canopy on the railway station in Novi Sad, Serbia, killing sixteen people (mostly young people and children) and severely injuring one more. In December, following attacks at the peaceful commemorative gathering targeted on students by the local regime officials, students decided to barricade some faculties as a form of protest. Since then, most of the faculties and universities around Serbia have been blocked by students at all times, with no form of lectures. Secondary school students, and their professors, also joined the ongoing blockades and have since stopped the work of most secondary schools in the country, despite the government's efforts to crush their revolt by threatening professors that their already low salaries would be cut off. Simultaneously, students are also organising various protests and acts of civil disobedience around the country. Students in Serbia have very concrete demands from the government that call for responsibility and justice in the wake of the Novi Sad tragedy: (1) Publication of all documentation regarding the reconstruction of the Novi Sad Railway Station, (2) Confirmation of the identity of individuals suspected of physically attacking students and professors, and the initiation of criminal proceedings against them, (3) Rejection of criminal charges against arrested and detained students during protests, as well as suspension of ongoing criminal proceedings, (4) Higher education budget increase by 20%[1]. CDN fully supports students' postulates.

While people and institutions reacted with overwhelming support and joined the student strikes, there has been severe harm of human rights from the government and their supporters. As every day at 11:52 (a time when the canopy at the railway station collapsed), students and citizens block rounds with 15 minutes of silence for the victims, there have been quite a few cases of harassment, including the cases of students suffering injuries due to being hit with a car of a passer-by. Students have also reported being blackmailed, their private information have been spread over the media, and some of them faced arrests and prosecution. Serbian police and government even questioned some of the foreign citizens under the allegations that they are involved in the student protests, and this included an open attack and spread of personal information of one of our friends from Croatia. On 25th of February, few NGOs have reported they have been searched and questioned by the police. These are all terrible harms of

human and civil rights, with emphasis on the harm of young people and students. All of the students' actions have been peaceful and it is evident that the government's reaction is harming the right to protest.

Thankfully, students have continued fighting hard for justice despite all the pressures. The protests are being organised around the country, and students are mainly going by foot from city to city. Even with the national television refusing to report on the happenings objectively, people have been reacting positively and joining all of the student actions. With the upcoming events and protest, tensions continue to rise, which is why more important than ever for youth to have the right to express their dissatisfaction through the protests without the threat of violence or arrest.

Since early 2024, Georgia has been gripped by a wave of mass protests. The unrest began in April and May when tens of thousands took to the streets of Tbilisi to oppose a controversial law resembling Russia's "foreign agent" legislation. Seen as an attempt to stifle civil society, the bill sparked the largest demonstrations in Georgia's recent history. However, instead of responding to public concerns, the government doubled down, escalating repression against activists and protesters.

Tensions reached a boiling point in October, when parliamentary elections were marred by widespread allegations of fraud. The ruling Georgian Dream party declared victory, but many saw the results as illegitimate. Outrage over the rigged elections triggered another wave of protests, further fueled by the government's announcement that EU accession talks would be postponed until 2028. By November, demonstrations had grown even larger, met once again with harsh crackdowns. Months later, the protests continue, as does the government's campaign of repression.

Young activists now find themselves at the forefront of this struggle, facing an increasingly hostile environment. Over the past few months, the government has ramped up efforts to silence dissent through legal restrictions, digital surveillance, and even physical attacks. Oppressive laws are introduced on a daily basis. Protesters are met with brute force, while civil society organizations operate under growing pressure from restrictive laws. Young people from marginalized backgrounds are disproportionately targeted. Many have been harassed, fined, arbitrarily detained, or physically assaulted.

The consequences are severe. Fear and exhaustion are driving many into self-censorship, while others are burning out under the weight of constant repression. Despite the dangers, however, the protests persist, a testament to the resilience of those still fighting for Georgia's democratic future.

If the political situation in these countries was different, CDN would demands better policies and police training to protect the rights of protesters. We are, however, well aware that in the autocratic regimes and failing democracies, policies are not enough. This is why we want for the protestors' demands to be met and for these protests to be seen as a fight for democracy.

While we recognize existing support from the international community, CDN calls for stronger media coverage and calls to action from the international institutions that can protect the rights to protests in Eastern Europe, especially Georgia and Serbia. Governments have seriously harmed both the local

youth and foreigners, and reactions like this are endangering democracy around the whole region. We need to spread the word about the current situations and show how young people are fighting for democracy for months, giving an amazing example for all. Only with both internal and external pressures can people help reach their goals. We recognize all the demands of the protests both in Serbia and in Georgia as important stepping stones for reaching democratic regimes and liberation of people of these countries.

--

[1]Instagram post by Student Blockades, 19th January 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DFAdx-IoFdf/

Reason

The reasoning is presented in the content of resolution.

Supporters

Young Greens of Georgia; Zelena Omladina Srbije