

Open Letter from civil society organizations in support of human rights defenders, nonprofit organizations and media from Republika Srpska/Bosnia and Herzegovina

We, the undersigned organizations dedicated to the promotion of universal human rights, write to **voice our strong support for the non-profit organizations and media from Republika Srpska**, entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to **condemn efforts of authorities in Republika Srpska which want to restrict human rights**, especially freedoms of expression and association of human rights defenders, media and those who openly criticize corruption and violation of law by the government.

The government in Republika Srpska wants to impose new laws in its jurisdiction: the *Amendments to the Criminal Code of Republika Srpska* by which slander and insult are criminalized under Articles 208a and 208b, along with the disclosure of personal and family circumstances under Article 208v and the *Draft Law on the Special Register and Transparency of Operation of Non-Profit Organizations in Republika Srpska* that institutes a special register of NGOs (non-profit organizations) established in Republika Srpska who receive donations from outside the country, designates them as “agents of foreign influence” and additionally bureaucratizes and complicates their work.

Both pieces of legislation are deliberately vague and can be interpreted in excessively broad ways to **greatly limit the freedom of expression and association** of human rights defenders, media, journalists, activists, NGOs and all other citizens. According to legal analysis from leading legal experts, these laws cannot be considered “necessary in a democratic society”. Moreover, changes in the laws of Republika Srpska will not stifle freedom only within Republika Srpska, but have a potential chilling effect across Bosnia and Herzegovina. They constitute a **direct legislative attack on civil society, media, and the open expression of any kind of criticism or dissent**.

The international human rights standards on freedom of expression and freedom of association, as well as the international obligations of Bosnia and Herzegovina under its membership of the Council of Europe, OSCE and the United Nations were not taken into account at all in the preparation and discussion regarding these laws. The framework for obtaining the candidate status of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the European Union clearly states that Bosnia and Herzegovina must meet certain requirements, among which it must guarantee the freedom of expression and freedom of media, as well as the rule of law and other basic rights. The legal initiatives taking place in Republika Srpska are the absolute opposite of that.

We urge all competent authorities **to honour their obligations under international human rights standards by doing everything in their power to prevent these laws from being adopted**. If these laws are passed, many non-profit organizations will be prevented from conducting their work and many media outlets and journalists will have to engage in self-censorship. These laws would be immensely detrimental to civic space in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and directly impact civil society and media in Republika Srpska.

Promotion and protection of equal and inalienable rights form the basis of the rule of law, peace and security. This is especially important in a context like Bosnia and Herzegovina to ensure that human rights and freedoms are not rolled back, and that authorities act in accordance with democratic principles and human rights standards. If this does not happen, the **fragile democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina can very easily be shattered into pieces.**

Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ)

Centre for Peace Studies

Civic Initiatives Belgrade

Civil Rights Defenders

Front Line Defenders

Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia

Human Rights Centre ZMINA

Human Rights House Belgrade

Human Rights House Foundation

Human Rights House Tbilisi

Human Rights House Zagreb

International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH)

Media Institute Georgia

PEN Belarus

Protection International

Rights Georgi

Sapari

The Secretariat of the Shelter Movement in Norway

World Organization Against Torture (OMCT)