

Hybrid Repression

:

Security, Surveillance, and the Fiction of Democracy in Serbia

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Introduction

In contemporary Serbia, the security and intelligence apparatus—envisioned initially as a guardian of constitutional order and national security—has increasingly assumed the role of an instrument of political repression. Under the leadership of President Aleksandar Vučić, institutions such as the Security-Information Agency (BIA) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MUP) are systematically deployed not to protect citizens but to preserve power, eliminate critics, and suppress civic activism.

This practice, characteristic of hybrid authoritarian regimes, peaked during the 2024–2025 student protests. Beginning in response to a tragedy in Novi Sad, they quickly evolved into a mass youth movement against corruption, media control, and political arbitrariness. Among the prominent figures of resistance was Vuk Nektarijević, a 19-year-old student who symbolically began a bicycle journey to Strasbourg, drawing international attention to repression in Serbia.

The regime responded with a coordinated campaign, from surveillance and intimidation to media disinformation and psychological pressure on the Nektarijević family. This text analyzes how the security services function as a repressive pillar of Vučić's rule, mapping how they are used for surveillance, discreditation, and dismantling nonviolent resistance. Through the case of Vuk Nektarijević, we examine the mechanisms of institutional persecution and the broader consequences for democratic processes in Serbia.

The Origins of the Services: The Ideological Foundation of the Repressive Apparatus

The security and intelligence services in socialist Yugoslavia were not established as neutral institutions committed to the rule of law and the protection of citizens but rather as extensions of the ideological monopoly of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. Their formation was integral to the revolutionary seizure of power and establishment of a totalitarian order based on exclusivity, repression, and control.

The first organized service, the Department for the Protection of the People (OZNA), was established on May 13, 1944, in Drvar, amidst wartime operations, with the explicit mission of eliminating real and potential opponents of the communist revolution. Even in its earliest documents, OZNA was not defined as a protector of the people but as a mechanism for the "destruction of class enemies," which became the foundational model for developing all subsequent security structures.

After the war, OZNA was transformed into the State Security Administration (UDBA) and the military counterintelligence service KOS, creating a dual vertical structure of repression—civil and military. These institutions became the key pillars of internal terror, carrying out mass arrests, surveillance, political trials, and operating a system

of prison camps such as Goli Otok, aimed at ideological “deviants” and dissidents, particularly during the conflict with the Cominform (1948–1953).

The services were politically subordinated to the party, controlled through loyal personnel, and ideologically rigid. Their function was not to protect citizens but to control the population, suppress pluralism, and maintain party hegemony. This inherited model, where the security service is loyal to the leader rather than the law, left a deep institutional imprint that has remained resilient in Serbian political practice even decades after the breakup of Yugoslavia.

Simulation of Democracy: Multiparty System Without Pluralism

Introducing a multiparty system in Serbia in the early 1990s did not represent a genuine break with the authoritarian political culture inherited from the socialist era. Instead of true democratization, a fictional pluralism was established, in which the power structures remained untouched while political forms were merely adapted to meet new institutional requirements.

The most prominent example of this continuity is the transformation of the League of Communists of Serbia (SKS) into the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). Rather than lustration and an institutional break with the repressive past, only a cosmetic name change occurred, while the personnel, infrastructure, ideological frameworks, and ties to the security services remained intact. Under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević, SPS became the direct successor of the communist party in a new disguise, maintaining a monopoly over the security apparatus, media, economy, and political decision-making.

In this context, the security services played a crucial role in shaping the political scene, not only through surveillance and repression but also through the creation and manipulation of so-called opposition parties. The most prominent example of such practice is the founding of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), which maintained strong links with the state security apparatus from the beginning. SRS leader Vojislav Šešelj had multiple ties with security structures, and the rhetoric of his party often served as a functional extension of the regime: distracting public attention, polarizing the electorate, and providing a convenient alibi for the “centrist” SPS.

This “opposition tailored to the regime” allowed the ruling structure to maintain the illusion of a democratic process while real power remained concentrated in the hands of the party-security complex. Simultaneously, other controlled parties and movements were formed—often with logistical and financial support from the services—to fragment the opposition landscape and demobilize genuine social energy for change.

In essence, the multiparty system in Serbia was structured from the outset to function as a simulation—a procedural democracy without genuine pluralism, where the security structures and party decision-making centers remain the dominant actors of political power.

Security Services After the Breakup of Yugoslavia: An Instrument for the Survival of Authoritarian Rule

With the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia and the formal end of the one-party system, the security services did not undergo substantial reform or institutional

transformation. On the contrary, inherited repressive practices, personnel, and hierarchies remained intact. At the same time, the function of the services shifted from preserving the communist order to maintaining the personalized rule of Slobodan Milošević.

Between 1990 and 2000, the State Security Service (DB), operating within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, became the central pillar of Milošević's regime. Instead of professionalization and lustration, the UDBA-style operation model was reactivated and adapted to the new political conditions of a multiparty system. The services retained a monopoly over information, surveillance mechanisms, and institutional autonomy—making them even more potent than formally elected bodies.

During this period, DB played a key role in manipulating electoral processes, controlling the media, and forming so-called "constructive opposition" (SRS, SPO, United Serbia). The purpose of this opposition was to create the illusion of political pluralism while real power remained concentrated in the hands of one party and one man. Political parties that appeared to be part of the opposition were often infiltrated by agents or directly created through regime strategy, enabling Milošević to maintain a democratic façade for the international community.

Simultaneously, DB conducted intimidation campaigns, surveillance, and the elimination of real regime opponents, including journalists (e.g., Slavko Ćuruvija, Dada Vujasinović, Miodrag Pantić), opposition politicians, and independent media centers. Paramilitary formations were also established (e.g., the JSO – "Red Berets"), acting as an extension of the DB, participating in wartime operations and domestic intimidation.

The role of the security services during this period was not secondary or reactive—it was strategic, premeditated, and directly linked to the regime's survival. Instead of becoming a pillar of democratic consolidation, the services became the guarantors of post-communist authoritarianism, masked by democratic procedure.

Unfinished Reform: From a Missed Transition to Authoritarian Restoration

The October 5th changes of 2000 marked the end of Slobodan Milošević's regime. However, they did not result in a comprehensive reform of the security and intelligence sector, which had for decades served as a pillar of political repression. Instead of lustration, institutional reconstruction, and transparent oversight, the new democratic order accepted continuity with the old personnel, structures, and practices, justifying it in the name of political stability and a so-called "mature compromise."

During this period, the State Security Service (DB) was formally abolished, and in 2002, a new agency—the Security-Information Agency (BIA)—was established. However, the name change did not lead to structural transformation. Personnel, operational files, working methodologies, and ideological control patterns remained intact. The lack of political will for reform, fear of destabilization, and the immense power retained by the services all contributed to creating a semi-declarative democracy with deeply authoritarian undertones.

The services continued to function as instruments of political pressure, media control, election manipulation, and surveillance of civil society. Their influence became

especially prominent after the rise to power of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and Aleksandar Vučić in 2012 when a conservative shift occurred, and the security apparatus was fully reappropriated to serve the regime's personal and party power.

Under Vučić's leadership, BIA and other security structures became operational components of the political system, with clearly defined tasks:

- control and compromise of opposition actors,
- surveillance and infiltration of protests and independent organizations,
- coordination with media smear campaigns,
- creation of "enemies of the state" to mobilize support for the regime.

Alongside the formal centralization of control over the agencies, Vučić personally appoints and removes key figures within the services, including BIA directors, prioritizing loyalty to the President over professional or legal criteria. As a result, BIA has effectively become the "personal security service of the regime" rather than an institution serving the public.

Today, Serbia's security apparatus operates along a retrograde continuum with the worst elements of party-political security from the communist and Milošević eras—but now further refined by digital technologies, the deployment of troll farms and bot networks, media synchronization, and psychological operations in the public sphere.

Unified Security Sector: The Role of VBA and VOA in the Strategy of Control

In addition to the civilian BIA, the Military Security Agency (VBA) and the Military Intelligence Agency (VOA) also play a central role in Serbia's repressive infrastructure. Although these agencies were nominally established as professional and apolitical institutions within the Ministry of Defense, they originated from the communist-era OZNA. Under the rule of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and Aleksandar Vučić, these services have been de facto integrated into the broader apparatus of political control despite formally belonging to the military sector.

1. VBA: Internal Surveillance and Repression in Uniform

The VBA, tasked with protecting the Serbian Armed Forces from internal threats and espionage, has increasingly been used beyond its legal mandate over the past decade to:

- Monitor officers and military personnel based on their political views or perceived disloyalty to the regime;
- Track military figures and veterans connected to opposition movements or public criticism of the government;
- Apply discreet pressure on retired generals and active officers who oppose the militarization of politics.

Reports from independent organizations and whistleblowers frequently cite practices such as being summoned for "informational interviews," reassignment from key posts, demotions, and expulsion of those deemed "unreliable."

2. VOA: Abuse of External Intelligence and Control of the Diplomatic Arena

The VOA, whose primary mission is to gather intelligence from the international environment to protect national security, has become an instrument for:

- Monitoring foreign diplomatic contacts of opposition leaders and civil society actors;
- Reporting to the political leadership on international developments interpreted as threats to the regime's legitimacy;
- Collaborating with BIA and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MUP) in regional campaigns targeting critical media and organizations across the Western Balkans.

VOA is now used for external intelligence and as a support pillar for information and psychological operations, synchronized with BIA and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—often under direct instruction from the President's office.

Sector Consolidation: Vertical Loyalty, Not Horizontal Coordination

A key characteristic of Aleksandar Vučić's regime is the vertical control over the entire security system—from the military and police to intelligence and counterintelligence structures. Instead of inter-institutional balance and professional coordination, the system is defined by:

- personal loyalty to the President as the supreme authority,
- centralized decision-making within informal security-political circles,
- exclusion of civil society and parliamentary oversight from control over the services.

The VBA and VOA are not exceptions but active participants in the synchronized pressure on society, particularly in the context of protests, internal surveillance, media manipulation, and the undermining of the international reputation of critical actors.

Personal Loyalty Instead of Institutional Accountability: The Crisis of Personnel Policy in the Security Sector

One of the key problems of the security sector in contemporary Serbia is its abuse of political purposes and the way personnel management is conducted. Instead of professionalization, merit-based criteria, and transparent procedures, the dominant principle is personal loyalty to the President of the Republic, Aleksandar Vučić, who effectively controls appointments and assignments across all major security agencies.

1. No Competition, No Oversight, No Criteria

Although there is a formal legal framework for employment and promotion within agencies such as BIA, VBA, and VOA, in practice, key positions are filled at the discretion of political leadership—without public competition, mandatory integrity checks, or public transparency. Official posts—from department heads to agency directors—are filled based on decisions made by leaders who themselves were politically appointed.

This closed-loop loyalty system allows the President to manage the services through informal channels without needing to justify decisions to institutions or citizens. As a result, the security services become personalized, losing both independence and professional autonomy.

2. Structure of Loyalty: From Bottom to Top

Personnel who advance within the system do so not because of competence but because of party affiliation, personal ties to the SNS leadership, or longstanding loyalty to political power centers. Professionals who express reservations about these practices are:

- Reassigned to less relevant positions,
- Prematurely retired,
- Marginalized or quietly removed.

That leads to adverse selection throughout the sector, undermining institutional memory, expertise, and the services' ability to respond to real security challenges.

3. Vučić as the Supreme Security Chief: Centralization from the Shadows

Although the President is not formally the head of any security agency, in practice, he makes all major decisions—on appointments, task distribution, operational priorities, and even the political "targets" of the services. He does this through:

- Informal consultations with agency directors (BIA, VBA, VOA),
- Closed-door coordination meetings,
- Influence over legislative frameworks that further restrict oversight of the services.

Vučić often publicly portrays himself as the only one who "knows everything," who "has the information," and who is "in contact with the services 24/7." In doing so, he builds political capital on the absolute control of a sector that should be independent but instead becomes the regime's most powerful tool of fear and manipulation.

Erosion of the Security Sector: Criminalization Under Institutional Patronage

The security sector in Serbia, instead of serving as a pillar of the rule of law and citizen protection, has in recent years undergone deep erosion due to political instrumentalization and links with organized crime. Numerous scandals that marked the period from 2017 to 2023 show that nearly all major security agencies were involved in covering up, tolerating, or even being complicit in criminal activities—often with direct or indirect ties to the highest levels of government.

1. The "Jovanjica" Scandal: Systemic Protection of a Narco-Business

It was revealed that one of the largest illegal marijuana production sites in Europe, the "Jovanjica" estate, had operated for years under the protection and cooperation of members of the Ministry of Interior (MUP), the Security Information Agency (BIA), and the Military Security Agency (VBA).

The estate owner, Predrag Koluvija, had contact with top government officials and appeared at state events, and his lawyers and associates were linked to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).

Security service members were accused of falsifying reports, providing physical security and escort, and intimidating prosecutors and witnesses.

2. The "Belivuk" Scandal (Veljko Belivuk's Clan): Symbiosis of Crime and State Services

The criminal group led by Veljko Belivuk—responsible for brutal murders, extortion, and drug trafficking—received operational protection from high-ranking MUP and BIA officials.

The group operated from facilities at the Partizan football stadium, with the knowledge and consent of state authorities.

In encrypted messages via the Sky ECC app, Belivuk claimed he was “acting on behalf of the state” and had direct communication with Vučić’s inner circle.

3. Abuses in VBA and VOA: Cover-Ups and Inaction

Instead of investigating criminal infiltration into the military and its resources, the VBA and VOA acted selectively, often concealing or ignoring information that could compromise political leaders.

There are credible allegations that senior officers gave instructions to divert some instances toward so-called “internal enemies” of the regime while real criminal networks were tolerated.

4. Lack of Prosecution and Political Protection

Despite overwhelming evidence, no high-ranking political official has been prosecuted concerning these scandals.

All implicated or accused security personnel connected to Vučić’s regime received public or covert protection—ranging from suspensions without criminal proceedings to promotions or quiet transfers.

Vučić frequently makes public appearances to control the narrative, downplay the scandals, or attack the judiciary, further undermining the independence of institutions.

These affairs reveal a systemic symbiosis between the security sector and criminal groups, in which the services do not act independently but as extensions of the political elite. Instead of uncovering and combating organized crime, they tolerate it, protect it, or weaponize it for regime goals—including intimidation of opponents, protest control, and financing of loyal structures.

Such erosion of the security sector directly threatens the rule of law and national security, turning institutions that should defend legality into mechanisms of authoritarian control and criminal reproduction of power.

No Way Back: The Security Apparatus as a Guarantee of Personal Impunity

In Serbia's political system under Aleksandar Vučić, security agencies are no longer merely tools of societal control—they have become an existential mechanism for maintaining power. This concentration of authority is not grounded in constitutional order but in the interwoven interests of the political and security elite, built on corruption, unlawful actions, and mutual protection.

1. Mutual Dependence: The Regime Protects the Services—The Services Protect the Regime

Vučić’s position at the top of the system allows him to:

- Directly appoint loyal individuals to lead all key agencies (BIA, MUP, VBA, VOA),
- Allocate resources and political protection to those fulfilling political control tasks (discreditation, surveillance, infiltration),
- Ensure institutional immunity from criminal accountability for numerous scandals involving the services (Jovanjica, Belivuk, wiretapping, election fraud, unlawful surveillance).

In return, the services guarantee:

- Regime stability through repression, surveillance, and proactive neutralization of protests and dissent,
- Logistical, personnel, and informational support to the party apparatus (including internal purges within SNS),
- Intimidation of prosecutors, judges, and media, effectively preventing the exposure and prosecution of key power circles.

2. Potential Consequences in the Event of a Regime Change

In the event of real political change, including institutional lustration and restoration of the rule of law, many actors from the current ruling elite and the security apparatus would face:

- Criminal prosecution for abuse of office, obstruction of justice, and cooperation with organized crime,
- Loss of political and material power,
- Isolation and potential international accountability, particularly related to arms trafficking, drug trade, and misuse of EU funds.

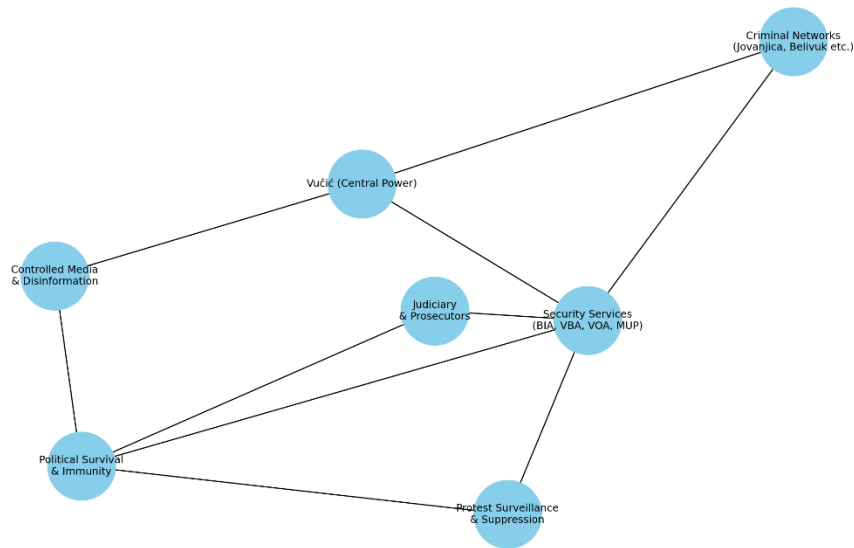
Therefore, the security structures do not behave as professional state institutions but as a cohesive defensive shield of the regime—tasked with extending Vučić's political survival not out of belief in his legitimacy but because their freedom and impunity depend on it.

3. Final Diagnosis: A Criminalized State Shielded by the Security Apparatus

Vučić's system of rule cannot survive without control over the security apparatus because it is within this apparatus that the archives of abuses lie—the evidence of criminal ties and the actors who carried out the most sensitive operations. By maintaining vertical control, the President not only governs but holds the keys to the freedom and fate of hundreds of associates within institutions that, in a democratic order, should oversee him—not serve him.

Thus, the struggle for the rule of law and democracy in Serbia is not about electoral cycles or opposition performances—it is about dismantling a deeply entrenched system of political-security dependency, in which the fall of one man would also mean the collapse of the protective net surrounding an entire corrupt apparatus.

Network of Power: Vučić, Security Sector, Criminal Links, and Political Survival



Targeting the Nektarijević Family: Repression Across Generations

The case of Vuk Nektarijević, a 19-year-old student activist who became a symbol of civic resistance during the 2024–2025 protests in Serbia, exemplifies the regime's intolerance toward dissent. His peaceful bicycle journey to Strasbourg, which gained international attention, prompted not only personal targeting but a full-spectrum campaign of repression against his entire family—most notably, his father, Boško Nektarijević.

Boško Nektarijević is a prominent intellectual educated at Solvay Business School and Harvard and one of Serbia's leading experts on European funding oversight. In Serbia, it seems dangerous to be a public intellectual but also one of Serbia's foremost experts on European funding oversight. As an expert engaged by EU institutions to monitor the allocation and legality of European assistance and credit mechanisms, he has exposed numerous irregularities and corruption involving EU funds, directly implicating networks close to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). His findings—linked to procurement, development projects, and international credit misuse abuses—have undermined the regime's carefully constructed image as a competent and reliable partner to Brussels.

As such, the Nektarijević family represents a dual threat to the regime:

- An institutional threat stemming from Boško's professional credibility and his disclosures about corruption;
- A symbolic threat embodied in Vuk's moral defiance, youth-driven activism, and capacity to mobilize civic solidarity.
- In response, the regime launched a coordinated campaign of character assassination:
- Dozens of tabloids and online portals ran defamatory pieces accusing Vuk of extremism, moral deviance, and foreign allegiance;

- Boško was simultaneously targeted with fabricated personal and professional allegations, aiming to strip him of public trust and EU legitimacy;
- Both were subjected to psychological pressure, surveillance, and intimidation—clear indicators of state-orchestrated retaliation.

This pattern reveals a broader authoritarian doctrine: familial repression as a tool of political survival. By attacking the son through the father—and vice versa—the regime not only punishes dissent but seeks to deter future acts of resistance by making the cost deeply personal and socially isolating.

The Nektarijević case demonstrates that no civic courage, institutional integrity, or moral protest will be tolerated in today's Serbia if it challenges the dominant political narrative. The state's response is not incidental—it is systemic. Silencing criticism, destroying reputations, and neutralizing moral authority are key pillars in the architecture of Vučić's political survival.

Contextualization: Nektarijević's Case and the Regime's Influence Apparatus

Boško Nektarijević's report *"Pedaling Against Tyranny"* offers a concrete and detailed case study that illustrates how Serbia's hybrid authoritarian regime weaponizes its security, media, and political structures against civic resistance, particularly student-led protests.

1. Security Services as Instruments of Internal Repression

- BIA monitored, intimidated, and harassed Vuk Nektarijević and his family, a key protest organizer.
- These actions included covert surveillance, data leaks, and psychological pressure.
- That reflects the BIA's role as not a national security institution but a regime tool for suppressing dissent.

2. Media Narrative Engineering and Synchronized Attacks

- Within 48 hours, over 40 articles across regime-aligned tabloids and TV channels launched a smear campaign.
- Messaging included false accusations (e.g., supporting violence, racism, etc.) coordinated with bot networks.
- The map's "Controlled Media" node mirrors how these outlets function as regime megaphones.

3. Fake Opposition and Protest Neutralization

- Nektarijević highlights the silence or passive complicity of formal opposition parties.
- Meanwhile, certain pseudo-opposition groups deflected blame, accused protestors of being foreign agents or provoked disruption.
- These actors match our classification of "fake opposition," engineered to fracture public support and muddy political alternatives.

4. Cognitive Suppression Through Information Operations

Disinformation cycles were tightly choreographed:

media publish falsehoods → bots amplify, → officials react to falsehoods as fact.

This structure produces psychological fatigue and distrust among citizens, undermining the protest's legitimacy.

The map's interconnected nodes reflect this propaganda, misinformation, and manufactured confusion feedback loop.

And what?

Boško Nektarijević's case reveals how each element of the regime's apparatus—from intelligence to controlled opposition—functions as a cohesive system designed to:

- detect and isolate resistance,
- neutralize its leaders,
- distort public perception,
- Moreover, ultimately, protect the ruling structure through soft and hard power.

That confirms the theoretical structure mapped above as a real-world model of hybrid authoritarian control in contemporary Serbia.

Can the Security Services Be Reformed Without Regime Change?

Reforming Serbia's security and intelligence sector is not simply a question of better procedures or staffing—it is a question of power and values. In the current system, security services function not as professional institutions serving the public good but as political instruments of regime preservation.

1. Three Preconditions for Genuine Reform

Real reform is impossible without addressing three foundational issues:

- Change of political power – The SNS and SPS, rooted in authoritarian traditions, rely on the current security structure for survival and cannot be expected to dismantle it willingly.
- Transformation of institutional culture – The services operate through loyalty networks, informal influence, and historical impunity; reform requires lustration, depoliticization, and professionalization.
- Shift in societal values – Citizens must reject the normalization of repression. A democracy cannot exist where fear and force against dissent are tolerated.

2. The Significance of Student Demands

The demands articulated by student protestors go beyond isolated grievances—they call for a new social contract between state and citizen. Their insistence on:

- An end to political and media persecution,
- Protection of the right to protest and expression,
- Depoliticization of the police and intelligence services,

...is essential for democratic consolidation. Students are not just resisting corruption—they are confronting the very logic of authoritarian governance.

3. Preventing Another Nektarijević Case: Key Reforms

To avoid the repetition of politically motivated persecution like that of Vuk and Boško Nektarijević, the following institutional steps are needed:

- Legally codify the neutrality of security services and implement independent oversight bodies;
- Create a civilian-controlled national commission with academic and international participation for security reform;
- Criminally prosecute political misuse of intelligence agencies and revisit prior abuses;
- Apply lustration measures and ban key figures involved in repression from public office;

Institutionalize protections for whistleblowers, students, activists, and journalists.

A Civilizational Choice

Security sector reform in Serbia is not a technical issue but a civilizational decision. As long as authoritarian control structures remain in place, no procedural fix will restore democracy. Real change requires a break with the legacy of personalized power, impunity, and systemic intimidation.

The student movement is the first real challenge to that structure, which is why it is being attacked. If the Nektarijević case teaches us anything, democracy cannot survive where repression is normalized, and bravery is punished.