



# STARTING THE DEBATE ON FACIAL RECOGNITION: A CASE STUDY FROM BELGRADE

// **DANILO KRIVOKAPIĆ**, DIRECTOR, SHARE FOUNDATION

In early 2019, Serbian government officials unveiled plans for a cutting-edge surveillance system with face and license plate recognition capabilities that would cover the entire capital city of Belgrade. Over the following two years, the digital rights group SHARE Foundation reframed the discussion around this project in an effort that mobilized tech enthusiasts, local residents, media outlets, and the broader European digital rights community. Here, SHARE director Danilo Krivokapić discusses their approach.

When Serbia's interior minister and police director announced plans to install **1,000 high-tech cameras from People's Republic of China (PRC) tech giant Huawei**, their statement crystalized worries that had been growing among members of our team since we first heard about vague proposals to "upgrade" traffic cameras in the city. By 2019, Serbia's civil rights record had been trending downward on global indices. Institutional protections were failing, and digital rights violations that our team witnessed were never properly addressed by the legal system. Against this backdrop, new surveillance plans raised urgent civil liberties concerns. With this announcement now public, we turned to gathering more detailed information and mustering our ranks within the community.

The official narrative assured citizens that this project would make them safer and that the constant automated surveillance it entailed could not be abused.<sup>75</sup> No other information was disclosed. **The public was not informed about the technical scope of the system or its price; the specific needs it was meant to address; or the safeguards that would be needed** to mitigate potential human rights risks. Many of our freedom of information (FOI) requests about the project were denied.

## Reframing the narrative

Nonetheless, we were able to partially reconstruct the official basis for the state's purchase of this sophisticated surveillance equipment: **Serbia and the PRC had reached an undisclosed agreement on economic and technical cooperation** in 2009, followed by agreements with Huawei in 2014 and 2017.<sup>76</sup> Within this framework, **the "Safe Society" project** to enhance information and communications technology (ICT) systems and "increase the security of citizens," as the Interior Ministry described it to us, emerged.<sup>77</sup>

Additional information was provided by Huawei inadvertently: A case study on the company's website detailed technical characteristics of the project—which included upgrades to the Serbian Interior Ministry's "command and data center" in addition to the camera system—and the timeline of company's deals with the Interior Ministry. The day after we shared these facts with the public, the page with the case study was removed from Huawei's website.<sup>78</sup>

In Serbia's deeply polarized society, disinformation and conspiracy theories involving digital technologies are rife. We needed to reframe the narrative by filling in the missing details about the camera project, while keeping it simple and avoiding a technophobic tone. No matter how valuable the promised benefits of the surveillance system might be, it was crucial to have an open and informed debate on the ways this technology might impact our individual rights and our future as a free society.

Citizens had been given vague promises of a sophisticated solution to their problems. We offered a clearer definition of what the facial recognition technology (FRT) was and how it worked: It processes biometric data constantly and indiscriminately, sweeping up information about our personal, immutable features. National and international instruments setting clear parameters around these practices are still lacking, but human rights groups and data protection authorities have itemized the many risks that biometric mass surveillance poses to personal privacy, equality and non-discrimination, the freedoms of speech and assembly, and a range of other legally protected human rights.<sup>79</sup>

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With little official information available, **we invited the public to help us establish the physical locations of the smart cameras.** Our informal initiative under the hashtag #hiljadekamera (#ThousandsofCameras) soon produced a crowdsourced map showing verified camera locations and their technical features.<sup>80</sup> The picture it presented was starkly at odds with the modest official list of camera locations the police had issued.

Alongside this effort, we pursued a range of awareness-raising tactics both online and in physical space. **Camera poles were tagged** with eye-catching stickers featuring QR codes that directed people to our website, **surveillance-inspired art installations** popped up around the city, **#hiljadekamera streetwear** became popular through a crowdfunding campaign, and **micro-websites, short video documentaries, and podcasts** on the topic gained attention online. We also shared our findings with more traditional human rights organizations in Serbia and used our international networks of tech-savvy privacy enthusiasts and digital rights advocates to spread the word throughout Europe.

Because Serbia was under heavy COVID-19 restrictions when we undertook this work, it was hard for us to gauge our message's reach. When we published a crowdsourcing appeal to gather additional funds for our campaign, the results stunned us. We passed our initial goal in less than a week.

In late summer 2021, the debate on biometric surveillance in Serbia moved to the legislative level. **We discovered that the Interior Ministry had opened a little noticed "public" debate on a proposed new police law, which was just about to close.** The proposal would have introduced legal grounds for mass biometric surveillance. Upon learning of this effort, we were able to obtain reactions from members of the EU Parliament as well as global and regional human rights organizations. Local media coverage was extensive. **In two days, the disputed proposal was pulled back.**<sup>81</sup>

This struggle is far from over. We know it, local governments know it, and the global surveillance industry knows it. While the digital transformation of public security is an unavoidable part of the future, it is up to citizens, human rights defenders, and the power of civic engagement to make sure that digitalization does not lead to dystopia.

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68 Weinberger writes: “use our existing policy-making processes—regulators, legislators, judicial systems, irate citizens, squabbling politicians—to decide what we want these systems optimized for. Measure the results. Fix the systems when they don’t hit their marks. Celebrate and improve them when they do.” For more information, please see: David Weinberger, “Optimization over Explanation: Maximizing the Benefits of Machine Learning Without Sacrificing Its Intelligence,” *Medium*, 28 January 2018, <https://medium.com/berkman-klein-center/optimization-over-explanation-41ecb135763d>.

## Overcoming Obstacles to Surveillance Research: Lessons for Civil Society

69 For more information, please visit <https://adc.org.ar/en/home>.

70 This essay draws on research published in the December 2021 ADC report *Surveillance Technology in Argentina*, authored by Alejo Kiguel, Eduardo Ferreyra, and Leandro Ucciferri (available at <https://adc.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ADC-Surveillance-Technology-in-Argentina.pdf>) and in Gaspar Pisanu et al., *Surveillance Tech in Latin America: Made Abroad, Deployed at Home*, Access Now, 10 August 2021, [www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2021/08/Surveillance-Tech-Latam-Report.pdf](http://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2021/08/Surveillance-Tech-Latam-Report.pdf).

71 Pisanu et al., *Surveillance Tech in Latin America*, 7.

72 The archived page is available at “Case Study: Integrated Urban Safety Solutions, Tigre City,” NEC, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170321095617/http://www.nec.com/en/case/tigre/pdf/brochure.pdf> (accessed 21 March 2017).

73 Dave Gershgorn, “The U.S. Fears Live Facial Recognition. In Buenos Aires, It’s a Fact of Life,” *OneZero*, 4 March 2020, <https://onezero.medium.com/the-u-s-fears-live-facial-recognition-in-buenos-aires-its-a-fact-of-life-52019eff454d>.

74 “Argentina: Child Suspects’ Private Data Published Online,” Human Rights Watch, 9 October 2020, [www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/09/argentina-child-suspects-private-data-published-online](http://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/09/argentina-child-suspects-private-data-published-online).

## Starting the Debate on Facial Recognition: A Case Study from Belgrade

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76 Stojkovski, “Big Brother Comes to Belgrade.”

77 “MUP Decision,” letter published by SHARE Foundation, 7 March 2019, <https://resursi.sharefoundation.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Resenje-MUP-7.3.2019..pdf>.

78 The archived page can be found at <https://archive.ph/pZ9HO>. For more information, please see: “Huawei Knows Everything About Cameras in Belgrade—And They Are Glad to Share,” SHARE Foundation, 29 March 2019, [www.sharefoundation.info/en/huawei-knows-everything-about-cameras-in-belgrade-and-they-are-glad-to-share/](http://www.sharefoundation.info/en/huawei-knows-everything-about-cameras-in-belgrade-and-they-are-glad-to-share/).

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