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# **SERBIA**

## **Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and Journalists' Safety Index 2024**

Author  
**Rade Đurić**



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# About the Project

## BACKGROUND OF THE INDICATORS

The journalists' associations from the Western Balkan countries, supported by the European Commission<sup>1</sup>, have established the platform [Safejournalists.net](https://safejournalists.net) to jointly monitor media legislation and practice in their countries and engage in advancing the legal and institutional environment in which the journalists and other media professionals work. Every year, based on a carefully designed methodology<sup>2</sup>, the [Safejournalists.net](https://safejournalists.net) partners conduct advocacy research which has provided journalists' associations with evidence-based, reliable, and relevant data on the main problems and obstacles in the implementation of the EU standards in the field of media and journalists' freedom and safety in the Western Balkans. The results of the advocacy research help shape partners' studies, providing them with new evidence and examples thereby strengthening their position in advocacy efforts.

The first qualitative research tool – *Indicators on the level of media freedom and journalists' safety*, was first developed in 2016 and gradually fine-tuned over the years. It is composed of three groups of indicators: (A) Legal protection, (B) Journalists' position in the newsroom, and (C) Journalists' safety. Based on this monitoring tool, a total of seven assessments were published, the last one is from 2023.

The quantitative research tool – *Journalists' Safety Index*, was developed in 2020 and tested in 2021. It is designed to "measure"

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1 In December 2022, the European Commission approved a new three-year cycle of the platform [Safejournalists.net](https://safejournalists.net), which is a continuation of the previous two phases: the project Western Balkan's Regional Platform for advocating media freedom and journalists' safety (January 2016 – December 2018) and [Safejournalist.net](https://safejournalist.net) (February 2020 – March 2023). The main objective of the project is to empower and strengthen the role of the national journalists' associations, members of the Platform [Safejournalists.net](https://safejournalists.net), to become effective and accountable independent actors in advocating and creating relevant media policies in their countries: Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS), Association of BH Journalists (BHJ), Croatian Journalists Association (CJA), Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AJK), Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) and the Trade Union of Media of Montenegro (TUMM). The project is funded under the EU Civil Society Facility and Media Programme in favour of the Western Balkans and Turkey for 2021-2023 (IPA III).

2 The advocacy research is designed and coordinated by Snežana Trpevska and Igor Micevski, research fellows of the Research Institute on Social Development RESIS, from North Macedonia ([www.resis.mk](http://www.resis.mk)).

the changes in the environment that have direct or indirect impact on how safe journalists and other media actors feel when practicing their profession. It is composed of four groups of indicators: (1) Legal and Organisational Environment, (2) Due Prevention, (3) Due Process, and (4) Actual Safety. Based on this tool, a total of three research cycles were implemented: 2020 (pilot project), 2021 and 2022.

The platform [Safejournalists.net](https://safejournalists.net) will combine the two (qualitative and quantitative) research methodologies i.e. tools into one single advocacy research project – *Indicators on the level of media freedom and Journalists' Safety Index*. The platform monitors the situation in seven countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo<sup>3</sup> and Serbia.

## METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The entire research process is divided into two phases: in the *first phase*, data is collected for all qualitative indicators – both for media freedoms and for the safety of journalists, while in the *second phase*, the qualitative indicators for the safety of journalists are converted into quantitative ones and the procedure of scoring and calculation of the Journalists' Safety Index is carried out.

A range of various research methods were applied to collect and analyse data related to each specific qualitative indicator:

- review of studies, analyses, research reports, policy papers, strategies and other documents;
- qualitative analysis of legal documents;
- retrieval and analysis of information published on the websites of public institutions and other organizations and bodies;
- retrieval and analysis of press releases, announcements and other information produced by professional organisations;
- secondary data collected by journalists' associations;
- in-depth-interviews with experts, journalists, policy makers etc.;
- focus groups with journalists, and
- surveys with journalists (in some of the countries).

At the national level, advocacy research is conducted by national researchers who collect data and write narrative reports, which are then reviewed by local media and legal experts and the lead researcher. In Serbia, the Independent

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3 This name is without prejudice to the status and in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and the opinion of the Tribunal on the Declaration and Independence of Kosovo.

Journalists' Association of Serbia appointed Rade Đurić as national researcher, Kruna Savović as a research associate, and Prof. Aleksandra Krstić as media expert and public prosecutor Lidija Komlen Nikolić as legal expert.

## QUALITATIVE INDICATORS ON THE LEVEL OF MEDIA FREEDOM AND JOURNALISTS' SAFETY

The following table presents all qualitative indicators for the level of media freedom and safety of journalists, divided into three areas. These qualitative indicators are presented in descriptive or narrative form. The indicators used in the conceptual framework for the Journalists' Safety Index are shaded in **red** in the table.

*Overview of all qualitative indicators (Indicators on the level of media freedom and journalists' safety)*

A. Pravne mjere zaštite i njihova provedba	B. Položaj novinara u redakcijama	C. Sigurnost novinara
A.1 Basic guarantees for media and journalists' freedom and their application in practice	B.1 The job positions of journalists are stable and protected at the workplace	C.1 Journalists and media actors have access to immediate and effective protective measures
A.2 Independence and efficiency of the regulatory authority	B.2 Editorial independence in the private media	C.2 Journalists and other media actors have access to special protection or safety mechanisms
A.3 Independence and autonomy of the public service media	B.3 Editorial independence in the public service broadcasters	C.3 Female journalists have access to legal measures and support mechanisms when faced with gender-based threats, harassment or violence
A.4 Financial support to quality journalism and media content of public interest	B.4 Editorial independence in the not-for-profit media sector	C.4 Practice of regular public condemnation of threats and attacks on journalists and media has been established
A.5 State advertising in the private media sector	B.5 Freedom of journalists in the news production process	C.5 Police authorities are sensitive to journalists' protection issue
A.6 Legal provisions related to defamation and their application do not create a chilling effect on journalists and the media	B.6 Working position of women journalists	C.6 Specialised units/officers are equipped with expertise for investigating attacks and violence against journalists
A.7 Other laws are enforced objectively and allow journalists and other media actors to work freely and safely		C.7 Investigations of serious physical attacks on journalists and other media actors are carried out efficiently (independently, thoroughly and promptly)
A.8 Confidentiality of journalists' sources is guaranteed in the legislation and respected by the authorities		C.8 Journalists and other media actors are efficiently protected from various forms of online harassment
A.9 Journalists are free to pursuit their profession and to establish, join and participate in their associations		C.9 Investigations of all types of attacks and violence against journalists and other media actors are carried out transparently
A.10 Right to access official documents and information		C.10 Quality statistics collection systems established by state authorities to stem impunity
		C.11 Non-physical threats and harassments
		C.12 Threats against the lives and physical safety of journalists
		C.13 Actual attacks
		C.14 Threats and attacks on media outlets and journalists' associations

JOURNALISTS’ SAFETY INDEX

Taking into consideration the standards and recommendations established by the Council of Europe and other international organisations, the concept of “journalists’ safety”<sup>4</sup> was operationally defined by considering the following four dimensions:

- I. **Legal and Organisational Environment** – the existence and implementation of legal safeguards relevant for the safety of journalists.
- II. **Due Prevention** – the existence and implementation of a range of preventative measures that have direct effects on journalists’ protection and safety
- III. **Due Process** – the behaviour of state institutions and public officials towards journalists and the efficiency of the criminal and civil justice system concerning the investigations of threats and acts of violence against journalists.
- IV. **Actual Safety** – incidents and instances of various forms of threats and acts of violence against journalists and media.

The table below presents the four dimensions and indicators that make up the theoretical model of “journalists’ safety” concept. Data for all these indicators were collected in the first phase of the research, and in the second phase, based on the collected research evidence, nine members of the Advisory Panel from each of the countries<sup>5</sup> assessed the situation and assigned scores for each of the 19 indicators:

Overview of indicators related to the Journalists’ Safety Index

I. Legal and Organisational Environment	II. Due Prevention	III. Due Process	IV. Actual Safety
1.1 Legal provisions related to defamation and their application do not create a chilling effect on journalists and the media	2.1 Journalists and media actors have access to immediate and effective protective measures	3.1 Specialised units/officers are equipped with expertise for investigating attacks and violence against journalists	4.1 Non-physical threats and harassments
1.2 Confidentiality of journalists’ sources is guaranteed in the legislation and respected by the authorities	2.2 Journalists and other media actors have access to special protection or safety mechanisms	3.2 Investigations of serious physical attacks on journalists and other media actors are carried out efficiently	4.2 c
1.3 Other laws are enforced objectively and allow journalists and other media actors to work freely and safely	2.3 Female journalists have access to legal measures and support mechanisms	3.3 Journalists and other media actors are efficiently protected from various forms of online harassment	4.3 Actual attacks
1.4 Journalists are free to pursuit their profession and to establish, join and participate in their associations	2.4 Practice of regular public condemnation of threats and attacks on journalists and media	3.4 Investigations of all types of attacks and violence against journalists and other media actors are carried out transparently	4.4 Threats and attacks on media outlets and journalists’ associations

4 Researchers from the RESIS Institute ([www.resis.mk](http://www.resis.mk)), Snežana Trpevska, Igor Micevski and Ljubinka Popovska Toševa developed the conceptual and methodological framework for the Index and the model for its aggregation, weighting and calculation.

5 Members of the Advisory panel in Serbia are Professor Irina Milutinović, Tatjana Lazarević, Jelena Petković, Ljiljana Stojanović, Bojana Jovanović, Bojan Cvejić, Predrag Milovanović, Stevan Ristić, and Veran Matić.

I. Legal and Organisational Environment	II. Due Prevention	III. Due Process	IV. Actual Safety
1.5 The job positions of journalists are stable and protected at the workplace	2.5 Police authorities are sensitive to journalists' protection issue	3.5 Quality statistics collection systems established by state authorities to stem impunity	

Note: When the male form is used in this report, it always refers simultaneously to female, male and diverse individuals. Multiple designations are omitted for the sake of better readability.

**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

- LPIM – Law on Public Information and Media
- LEM – Law on Electronic Media
- REM – Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media
- LIA – Law on Internal Affairs
- LA – Law on Advertising
- PMS – Public Media Service
- RTS – Radio Television of Serbia
- RTV – Radio Television of Vojvodina
- Mol – Ministry of the Interior
- SIA – Security and Information Agency
- LFAl – Law on Free Access to Information
- RSF – Reporters Without Borders
- AVMS Directive – Audiovisual Media Services Directive
- SPPO – Supreme Public Prosecutor’s Office
- PPO – Public Prosecutor’s Offices
- CC – Criminal Code
- CPC – Criminal Procedure Code
- OSCE – Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
- EU – European Union
- SLAPP – Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation



# Introduction

Serbia is a country with a very complex socio-political situation and numerous problems that significantly slow down its path toward European Union membership. The functioning of the state is characterized by the collapse of the principle of the separation of powers and the disproportionate influence of the executive branch over all other mechanisms of state functioning, especially on the police and the judiciary. The executive branch has completely assumed dominance in relation to the other two branches of government, with the President often acting beyond the scope of constitutionally defined powers. The President and high-ranking representatives of the executive branch almost regularly operate contrary to their competences, which has led to the endangerment of criminal law proceedings in particular.

Despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression and speech, these rights are gravely undermined in practice. Minority groups and vulnerable categories lack adequate support and remain on the margins of Serbian society. Although Serbia has adopted modern legislation, it has not led to any meaningful improvement in the quality of life for its citizens. The main concern of those in power is the illusion of economic progress with vague results accompanied by a decline in the quality of the basic constitutional rights of Serbian citizens. There is a growing number of extremely wealthy groups and individuals connected to those in power, who accumulate their wealth through activities in the grey and black zones. The police and judiciary are being abused by acting in the interests of certain groups.

Serbia is not on a favorable trajectory regarding the respect for human rights, as violence in public spaces by government officials remains a persistent issue. Violence in society is a consequence of a violent narrative that serves to maintain constant tensions and conflicts. Serbia is assessed as a "partly free country" (65/100), highlighting pressure on the media and self-censorship of journalists (53.8% according to the



Council of Europe).<sup>6</sup> Reporters Without Borders notes a drop in Serbia's score to 91st place in 2024, along with a continued decline in media freedom—despite a formal rise to 96th place in the 2025 rankings. Meanwhile, internet freedom is deteriorating due to the spread of disinformation by pro-government media.

The European Commission Report from October 2024 criticizes Serbia's insufficient progress on key issues related to democracy, the rule of law and alignment with the European Union's foreign policy. In particular, limited implementation of the law, insufficient protection of journalists, lack of transparency in media ownership and media financing are highlighted as key problems that the Commission has highlighted in the Report in the section on freedom of expression.<sup>7</sup> Despite new regulations aimed at strengthening the independence and efficiency of the REM, the fact is that it does not fully fulfil its obligations and competencies, and concerns are raised regarding the independence of the Regulator. The competition for the allocation of the fifth frequency for national broadcasting, announced in 2022, has not yet been completed and no justified explanation has been provided for the delay. Serbia has not yet been aligned with the revised EU Directive on Audiovisual Media Services.

Freedom House points out that, despite the legal framework guaranteeing freedom of the press, media freedom is undermined by threats of lawsuits or criminal charges against journalists for other criminal offences, the lack of transparency of media ownership, editorial pressure from politicians and politically connected media owners, direct pressure and threats against journalists, and high rates of self-censorship.<sup>8</sup> The media environment is shaped by extreme propaganda and manipulation of facts on a number of topics. Investigative journalists face smear campaigns, repressive tax investigations, threats from high-ranking politicians, and arrests. CIVICUS Monitor announced that Serbia was added to the platform's watchlist "because the authorities severely clamp down on civic space and incite violence against tens of thousands of people protesting against government corruption."<sup>9</sup> According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Serbian journalism is being systematically repressed yet European political leaders remain locked in a state of guilty inaction.<sup>10</sup> Serbia, for the eighth year in a row, has continued to decline in the most important global ranking of countries by perception of corruption in the public sector. In the 2024 ranking, the index stands at 35, placing Serbia in 105th position — its worst ranking since 2012, when the current methodology was introduced.

Freedom of expression and media freedom in Serbia have faced their most serious test to date since November 2024. Protests by students and citizens against corruption and irresponsibility, caused by the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad railway

6 [Freedom House Report for 2024, A3 pp. 15-20.](#)

7 European commission, [Serbia 2024 Report](#), Serbia, October 2024

8 Freedom in the world, [Freedom in the World 2025- Serbia](#), Freedom House, March 2025

9 Civicus Monitor, [Serbian Civil Society under Pressure as Country Sees Biggest Protests in Decades](#), March 2025

10 Reporters Without Borders, [Report for Serbia, 2024 and 2025](#), Reporters Without Borders, January 2025

station on 1 November 2024, which killed 14 citizens, and subsequently killed two more injured young people, have triggered a wave of student and citizen dissatisfaction. The consequences of corruption, crime, and the actions of the competent institutions have led to months of protests that have exposed the violent narrative of government officials. With the support of citizens and journalists, students have revealed the true extent of the abuses of government officials who, through public broadcaster and tabloid media, have attempted to relativize events and cover up the causes, thus reducing the influence of government officials on corrupt actions. With students entering the blockades and highlighting 4 key demands, to which two more were later added due to state repression, dissatisfaction grew into protests and blockades at universities, schools and streets.<sup>11</sup> In all this, independent journalists and media found their role, which, in addition to the student movement, became the main source of information for citizens about events in Serbia. Students partly took on the role of journalists, bringing information to the public and defending positions that free journalists have not been able to do so far and in which they have been largely prevented.

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11 Informal organization of Students in Blockade, [Students' Demands](#), November 2024



# Media freedom and journalists' safety in Serbia – Indicators

## A. LEGAL SAFEGUARDS AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION

### — A.1 BASIC GUARANTEES FOR MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS' FREEDOM AND THEIR APPLICATION IN PRACTICE

Freedom of expression is guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, including the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas.<sup>12</sup> This freedom may be restricted by the law only to protect the rights of others, to uphold the authority and objectivity of the court, to protect public health, morals or national security. The Constitution also guarantees freedom of the media, prohibits censorship and allows the establishment of media without prior approval, with legal regulation of radio and TV stations.

The legal framework consists of: the Law on Public Information and Media (LPIM) and the Law on Electronic Media (LEM), both amended in 2023, the Law on Public Service Broadcasting (LPSB), the new amendments of which according to the requirements of the European Commission and despite the planned activities in the Media Strategy were delayed, were adopted only in May 2025.<sup>13</sup> LPIM protects freedom of information, prohibits censorship and discrimination of journalists and guarantees editorial autonomy. However, measures that were supposed to strengthen media regulations have enabled the return of state ownership of the media. Freedom of expression on the internet is guaranteed, and internet access is available to everyone, including journalists, although it is not explicitly codified. For years, poor implementation of media laws has been pointed out, as confirmed by the 2020 Strategy for the Development of Public Information, which refers to the period until the end of 2025. The original action plan for implementation has expired, and a new one, although drafted long ago, is still awaiting adoption.

<sup>12</sup> [Constitution of the Republic of Serbia](#), Article 46

<sup>13</sup> [Media laws amended](#), Ministry of Information and Telecommunications, October 26, 2023

The implementation and exercise of citizens' and journalists' rights indicate serious problems and shortcomings. Limited progress has been recorded in freedom of expression, mainly referring to the effective implementation of the Media Strategy, the protection of journalists and media pluralism.<sup>14</sup>

In the past year, there has been no recorded filtering or restriction of internet content by state authorities in Serbia. Journalists have serious suspicions that internet access is being controlled and monitored, and instead of directly restricting access, there is suspicion that journalists' access and communication with other persons are being intercepted and monitored.<sup>15</sup> In April 2025, as a consequence of increased repression against citizens who disclosed information of public interest, a temporary decision was issued prohibiting the use of the internet to the well-known activist Marko Marjanović from Čačak for publishing the phone number of the Speaker of the National Assembly.<sup>16</sup> By April 2025, Marjanović had been arrested and detained four times for his tweets, on suspicion that he had endangered the safety of the Speaker of the National Assembly. He was issued a temporary measure prohibiting the use of the internet along with the possibility of defending himself while at liberty during further proceedings. Among other things, Marjanović was issued measures that excluded him from public and digital life.<sup>17</sup>

Reports point to threats to internet freedoms, emphasizing content manipulation and disinformation, rather than direct restrictions on access.<sup>18</sup> Technical attacks such as DDoS on independent media have been recorded (JUG press and Južne vesti, in March 2024), but these are cyber-attacks and without evidence of direct state involvement, rather than ordered blocking.<sup>19</sup>

Amendments to media regulations are not fully transparent and are not implemented in an inclusive process. Although the European Commission's comments on the new laws arrived as early as December 2023, the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications (MIT) only decided to respond to them at the end of 2024, by forming working groups to amend them at short notice.<sup>20</sup> These groups had an extremely short deadline for work, without insight into the original comments and later versions of the drafts sent to Brussels. The draft Law on Public Information and Media was never forwarded to the members of the working groups, and the final amendments were contrary to those that were prepared.

In May 2025, MIT presented all three laws to members of the working groups who agreed to participate in the meeting at which the laws were to be presented. The Coalition

14 European Commission, [European Commission Progress Report](#), Serbia 2024, p. 41

15 Amnesty International, [Report for Serbia: Serbian Institutions Use Spyware, Authorities use Cellebrite's spyware and forensic tools to hack journalists and activists](#), December 16, 2024

16 Crystal Matt Damon, the tweeter who publicly revealed Ana Brnabić's number: ["I can't go to a concert, to the mall, even to my 20th anniversary prom. I think I'm being followed."](#) [Nova.rs](#), 12.05.2025

17 [The Crystal Matt Damon case: What rights do we have in the digital world and what does the law say?](#)

18 Hamdi Firat Buyuk, [Threats to internet freedoms persist in Turkey and Serbia-report warns](#), Balkan Insight, 16.10.2024

19 Share/monitoring, [Monitoring labs data for 2024](#), Share Foundation, January 2025

20 Sofija Popović, [EU does not see the effects of media laws](#), EWB, 17.11.2024



for Media Freedom and other associations requested a public consultation on the amended regulations, but MIT refused and informed the requesters that the European Commission had confirmed the compliance of all drafts and requested comments to be submitted within 48 hours (with an additional few hours for translations of comments), with the explanation that further discussion would “slow down Serbia’s European integration process”.<sup>21</sup> Such an approach undermines democratic procedures and deprives all participants in the media community of their rights.<sup>22</sup>

The transparency and inclusiveness of the process to amend media laws have been questioned. It has become increasingly evident that the amendment process was initiated solely and exclusively in connection with the Reform Agenda, which involves the withdrawal of €1.583 billion from the EU Growth Plan, rather than with the intention of improving media regulations.<sup>23</sup> Although media stakeholders were formally invited, the Ministry was criticized for imposing the draft by the then Minister Dejan Ristić, without taking into account the proposals of the working groups and the key objectives of the Media Strategy, such as the financial independence of public service broadcasters and strengthening oversight over the influence of state-owned companies such as Telekom.<sup>24</sup> In its 2023 report, the European Commission, with an extended deadline for reforms until February 2025, expressed concern about the limited progress and emphasized the need for a transparent and inclusive process, which had not been fully achieved by April 2025.

Although important, the amendments to the aforementioned regulations were reduced to mandatory and limited comments from the European Commission. The working groups for amendments to the media laws were strictly controlled by members of GONGO organizations who refused to expand the scope of proposals to other important issues of improving the regulations. Together with representatives of the relevant Ministry of Telecommunications and Information and the Ministry of Justice, GONGO organizations always voted against proposals that were in line with the Media Strategy. The Ministry refused to extend the time for discussion and the material to other important topics beyond those addressed by the European Commission’s comments, citing a lack of time for discussion, with a promise that other obligations from the Media Strategy and the law would be discussed in 2025.<sup>25</sup>

The draft amendments to the LPIM contain provisions that, although declaratively confirming freedom of expression and the presumption of innocence, leave room for further interpretation and broader conclusions, which in no way strengthens the position of journalists, but rather puts them in even greater

21 Fonet i N1, [Committee adopted amendments to the Law on Public Information and the Law on Public Service Broadcasting](#), Fonet/N1, 09.06.2025

22 National Convention on European Union, [Unacceptable attempts to shift the state's responsibility for fulfilling European obligations onto civil society](#), NKEU, 02.06.2025

23 Ministry of European Integration, [Serbia's Reform Agenda adopted](#), 03.10. 2024

24 Ivana Nikoletić, [The Minister imposed amendments, and the Government rendered the process meaningless: How were the working groups for amendments to media laws "rushed through?"](#), Danas, 14.12.2024

25 [Coalition for Media Freedom and ANEM, Ministry of Information and Telecommunications discontinued good practice](#), NUNS, 04.02.2024

trouble when it comes to reporting in cases where the presumption of innocence may be jeopardized. The provisions that are further elaborated according to the EC's comments may in practice be arbitrarily applied against investigative journalists. New concepts that are already provided for in other laws are introduced and defined completely unnecessarily. In the part relating to public procurement of media services, instead of regulating media services in detail and precisely, a declarative article has been inserted that links procurement to the basic principles of the Law on Public Procurement, thus completely ignoring the EC's request. It introduces certain positive obligations for media outlets (directly or indirectly) owned by entities such as Telekom – such as an internal code of ethics, a ban on the participation of politicians and public office holders in management bodies, and the obligation to publish reports – but does not provide for any independent oversight of the implementation of these obligations, nor sanctions for their violation.<sup>26</sup> Relying solely on self-regulation in media outlets effectively controlled by the state falls far short of the guarantees needed for editorial independence and may serve to legitimize political influence. The examples of severe pressure on Euronews Serbia, which have provoked numerous reactions, demonstrates how declarative measures are insufficient without genuine institutional protection of editorial autonomy.

The amendments to the LEM should strengthen the functional independence of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), an institution that has not been functioning since November 2024 as a result of irresponsibility and abuse of power by decision-makers. The amendments additionally shift responsibility to media service providers in cases of publishing content that includes hate speech, violence, discrimination and other harmful content, with prescribed fines of RSD 500,000 to 2,000,000, which seems decisive on paper. However, there is still a systematic avoidance of prescribing clear rules for what is the essence of the media environment during elections: covert political advertising, officials campaigning and political marketing remain out of focus, which has been pointed out for years by all domestic and international organizations and institutions that observe the electoral processes in Serbia as one of the major problems.

In 2024, the Serbian state authorities did not introduce new licenses or strict conditions for the establishment of print or online media, since the legal framework in this regard remained unchanged. Civil society and international observers have expressed concerns about these trends, focusing on implementation and independence rather than formal barriers to establishment. The latest proposal of the Law on Foreign Agents in late 2024 introduces a potential indirect threat to journalists as well.<sup>27</sup> While it is not and will not be a requirement for media licensing and operation, the burden it would impose could discourage new independent media outlets, especially those that rely on project funding.

<sup>26</sup> [Z.B. What do the changes to media laws, which were imposed without public debate, bring?](#), Danas, 20.05.2025  
<sup>27</sup> CRTA, [Overview of the Draft Law on Foreign Agents](#), 04.12.2024

## — A.2 INDEPENDENCE AND EFFICIENCY OF THE REGULATORY AUTHORITY

The procedures for appointing members of REM in Serbia — both in December 2024 and during the second attempt in 2025 — were undemocratic and lacking transparency, with reports citing extensive public data and evidence of manipulation by the ruling party.<sup>28</sup>

The Committee on Culture and Information failed to initiate the procedure for the election of members of the REM Council on time, thus knowingly and intentionally violating the Law on Electronic Media. The failure to do so by August 2024 led to a formal and substantial standstill in REM activities and the cessation of the Council's work upon the expiration of the mandates of its members. As it turned out, this standstill has been ongoing for months. As a result, non-governmental organizations and journalists' associations filed criminal charges against the Committee Chairwoman.<sup>29</sup> According to LEM, the mandate of the REM Council members expired on 4 November 2024. At the end of 2024, the process of appointing new members of REM began, the further course of which was marked by controversies.<sup>30</sup> The nominations included suspicious organizations, conflicts of interest, and shortcomings in the work of the commission, which raised concerns about independence. Numerous nominators did not meet the requirements for nomination, and their candidates were not prominent experts. The procedure was marked by a lack of inclusiveness, and was seriously criticised by civil society and international bodies. Serious criticisms were raised based on analyses that completely exposed the nomination process, which initially led to significant pressure on representatives of the nominators and individuals from the non-governmental sector, and ultimately to the complete collapse of the sham procedure. Reports indicate manipulation of the process, including interference in the procedure, insults to nominated candidates and acceptance of nominations from organizations without credibility that were openly supported by government representatives. Civil society organizations and international organizations and bodies reacted to serious irregularities such as conflicts of interest and lack of transparency, suggesting that the process did not meet democratic standards. The European Commission's 2024 Report, although it does not cover the December events, states ongoing concerns about media freedom and regulatory independence of the Regulator, which is in line with these criticisms. The nomination process culminated in late December, during a session of the Parliamentary Committee on Culture and Information on 21 December 2024. The first procedure was suspended in January 2025 after the withdrawal of candidacies by seven independent candidates due to numerous perceived shortcomings in the process itself.

Following the students in blockades request, a new procedure for the election of Council members was launched in May

28 REMont, [Report on the implementation of procedures for the election of members of the REM Council](#), Civic Initiatives, 2024 and 2025

29 N1 Belgrade, [Criminal charges against the Chairperson of the Committee on Culture and Information, Nevena Đurić](#), N1, 29.11.2024

30 National Parliament, [Decision of the Council on initiating the procedure for the election of members of the REM Council](#), 29.11.2024

2025. However, numerous irregularities were again observed, almost identical problems as in the previous procedure, from unauthorized proposers and ineligible candidates, to procedural omissions and abuses. Dozens of complaints were filed with the competent committee, almost all of which were rejected. In the meantime, 78 proposers and 16 candidates withdrew their proposals and candidacies from candidate vetting and selection process due to gross violations of the rules of procedure.<sup>31</sup>

The Regulatory Authority does not perform its tasks independently and in a non-discriminatory manner. REM faces frequent criticism for its lack of genuine independence and for politically motivated decision-making. Concerns have been raised about the alignment of REM's actions with the interests of the ruling party in Serbia, in particular with regard to the allocation of national TV frequencies to pro-government channels.<sup>32</sup> REM did not respond to complaints in a timely manner during election campaigns (e.g. local elections in June 2024), continuing the passive approach seen in previous years.<sup>33</sup> The number of sanctions imposed for violations of the law, such as broadcasting hate speech or non-compliance with ethical standards, remained very low. The Regulator acts very selectively on complaints received, does not publish data on its actions or explain its decisions. Transparency of information was at a very low level, and after the withdrawal of the REM Council after 5 November, the technical department even refused to respond to citizens' requests for information of public importance. Since the end of the official mandate of the REM Council to this day, despite the establishment of the work of the Regulator's professional departments, there have been no decisions on the actions of media broadcasters in response to received requests and reports. The transparency of REM's work remained questionable, as monitoring reports were not always published in a timely manner.<sup>34</sup> REM was required to shorten the deadlines for handling complaints during election campaigns, but complaints from citizens and media associations often went unanswered or were dismissed.<sup>35</sup> REM continued to grant licenses, and in some cases its decisions only reinforced doubts about its impartiality. The Regulator openly placed itself at the service of private pro-government tabloid media, and the peak of its open support for pro-government media was the granting of a regional frequency to the tabloid television station Informer TV.<sup>36</sup> At the end of the previous Council's term of office, REM granted a regional license for Belgrade to the tabloid Informer, known for its pro-government editorial policy, disregard for the Serbian Journalists' Code, and daily incitement to violence and hate speech.<sup>37</sup> This decision drew criticism from members of the public and media associations, who argued that REM violated its own statute and compromised the transparency of the process. The license was granted without a public competition, at the last minute, amid numerous

31 IJAS, [78 authorized proposers, 16 candidates have so far withdrawn from the process of electing members of the REM Council](#), 13.06.2025.

32 European Commission, [European Commission Progress Report on Serbia](#), EC, 30.10.2024

33 Javni servis, [Serbian media scene](#), 07.09.2024

34 [Discussion table on media regulation](#), CRTA, 24.10.2024

35 Two journalists focus groups and interviews with media experts were held, moderator Krupa Savović, March 4th and 5th, 2025

36 Miljana Jeremić, [REM awarded regional licenses before the expiration of the mandate](#), Mediareform, 04.11.2024

37 Regulatory body for Electronic Media, [Public competitions for issuing permits](#), REM, 16.07.2024



procedural shortcomings and an evident intention to carry it out during the current Council's term, which suggests a politically motivated administration. In March 2025, Informer notified the public that it had returned the license.<sup>38</sup>

### — A.3 INDEPENDENCE AND AUTONOMY OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA

The autonomy and independence of public media in Serbia is guaranteed by special laws through clearly set principles and structural guarantees, however, the regulations were not sufficient to prevent the influence of other factors.<sup>39</sup> In 2024, amendments to the Law on Public Service Broadcasting were initiated, which were supposed to strengthen autonomy and independence, but due to interference by government representatives and a non-inclusive process, the opportunity to improve the position of public service broadcasters was consciously and intentionally missed. Two key issues that affect the achievement of independence and autonomy of public service broadcasters are the method of financing and the selection and independence of management bodies, which has not yet been achieved to a sufficient extent in these two public broadcasters. The new law brings certain positive changes, but does not resolve the key issues of editorial independence and concentration of power. Although provisions have been introduced that could separate the roles of bodies within public broadcasters, substantial separation of influence has not been ensured. In the previous year, these rights were not effectively protected in practice due to political interference, weaknesses in media financing and an inefficient regulatory body. The legal reforms indicate the intention to align the regulation with EU standards, however, their practical impact remains limited, leaving the role of public service broadcasters as independent democratic institutions extremely endangered. Through their work and practical results, public broadcasters have shown that they are far from guaranteed autonomy and independence.<sup>40</sup> The amendments still have not solved the problem of the lack of full financial and institutional independence of public broadcasters, as well as the adequate realization of the public interest in the context of the diversity of information content.<sup>41</sup>

The method of financing public service broadcasters still does not ensure their independence and stability. The combined method of financing is still in operation, which cannot ensure sufficient financial independence of public service broadcasters.<sup>42</sup> In 2024, public broadcasters were partially financed from the budget and the same amount of funds was allocated as in 2023 (RSD 900 million, which is directed to financing RTV).<sup>43</sup> With the amendments to the law, subscription fees as the main method of financing public service broadcasters are more precisely regulated and linked

38 Danas/Beta, [Zekić: Decision on the fifth frequency will not be made until the court case with TV Nova S has reached its conclusion](#), 09.08.2024

39 CRTA, [Public service broadcasting in Serbia](#), 24.10.2024

40 Autonomija Info, [Round table: Public Service Broadcasters do not work in the interest of the public](#), Autonomy, 24.02.2025

41 Ivana Kragulj, [Journalist and media organizations on the Draft Law on Public Service Broadcasting: Meaningless autonomy of the public service](#), IJAS, 10.12.2024

42 Research, [State media monitor](#), SMM, 26.08.2024

43 [Biznis.rs](#) editorial office, [RTS fills its budget mostly with subscriptions – RSD 11 billion in 2024](#), 23.04.2025

to the minimum wage at the level of the Republic of Serbia. The new rules on budgetary financing of public broadcasters, although they contain a declarative prohibition of political influence, leave room for abuse, especially through unclear categories such as “projects of special social importance”. Instead of essentially ensuring independence, leaving gaps has provided the opportunity for political rewarding of suitable media under the guise of implementing reform. The combined method of financing obviously cannot ensure sufficient financial independence of public broadcasters. While RTS managed to secure independent financing in previous years, RTV failed to do so and was directly financed from the budget even in 2024.<sup>44</sup>

The Programme Council, which has so far been presented as a representative body and supervisory authority in the public service broadcaster, has not performed its role adequately due to political influence on its appointment. The Council has not organized regular consultations with civil society on programming issues. It was appointed through a procedure that included both the Assembly Committee and the Board of Directors, which are highly susceptible to political pressure. According to available data, four public debates on programming content were held towards the end of 2024, but no reports on these debates have been publicly published.<sup>45</sup> According to the new amendments, the Programme Council is no longer just an advisory body, but elects the Commissioner for Viewers’ and Listeners’ Rights. However, the Commissioner remains marginalized – engaged on a part-time basis, without the ability to independently initiate proceedings. The biggest problem remains the retention of excessive power by the Director General of the public broadcaster, as the Board of Directors still does not have key powers in appointing editorial staff.

After the collapse of a canopy on 1 November at the Novi Sad railway station and the death of 15 citizens, large protests were organized, which included citizens’ dissatisfaction with RTS’s reporting on the event itself, the protests, and the real situation in Serbia.<sup>46</sup> In January 2025, the RTS Programme Council, as a form of reaction, announced that it regularly monitors the public broadcaster’s reporting and that it had repeatedly pointed out the need for objective and comprehensive information at its meetings and in letters.<sup>47</sup> However, practice shows that the Programme Council has no real influence on the work of the public broadcaster.

#### — A.4 FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO QUALITY JOURNALISM AND MEDIA CONTENT OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Although there are no official subsidy mechanisms for print media, the sector is unjustifiably supported through direct funding, co-financed projects, and advertising contracts. Regardless of the funding method, the awarding process

44 [Information on Operations of RTV](#), Commissioner for Information of Public Importance, april 2025

45 RTS, [Public discussion on RTS programme content](#), Portal RTS, 08.11.2024

46 Cenžolovka, [Petition from a part of RTS employees: Support for students, distancing from unprofessional reporting](#), 17.01.2025

47 RTS, [Statement from the RTS Programme Council](#), 28.02.2025

lacks fairness, transparency, and impartiality, favouring pro-government outlets and undermining quality journalism.<sup>48</sup> While such support should aim to serve the public interest, in practice it often funds tabloids that manipulate facts and attack independent media, as was noted in 2024.<sup>49</sup> This reflects serious challenges in financial support for media content of public interest, while there are ongoing calls for reform to ensure independence and sustainability. Competitions for co-financing media content production projects for 2024 were announced in 97 local governments, while 77 local governments violated the Law on Public Information and Media and failed to initiate proceedings on time.<sup>50</sup>

Total allocations for media financing in 2024 amount to RSD 2.46 billion (about EUR 20.5 million), including funds from the national, provincial and local levels. Various media outlets have received more than RSD 1,146,105,710 from the state in various ways. Over 90% of the observed funds were allocated to media outlets that support the government. According to BIRN's database, the largest recipients of funds from the media are RTV Novi Pazar, Novosadska TV, Radio-television Belle Amie, Zona Plus from Niš and VTV from Subotica.

The legal framework provides for project co-financing of media content of public interest through public competitions, which represent separate periodic annual funds for financing the production of media content. Competitions announced at the national level are implemented by the relevant Ministry of Information and Telecommunications, at the provincial level by the Provincial Secretariat for Culture, Public Information and Relations with Religious Communities, while at the local level this is done by local governments.

The project co-financing process was supposed to be significantly reformed by the new law and regulations, but almost identical problems remained. Competitions were mostly announced after the legal deadline, and a large number of local governments reallocated the allocation of funds to public procurement and other mechanisms. The system in the part of the competition conducted by the ministry has been improved and digitalized, but numerous irregularities have been observed in the work of the platform that are unacceptable and constitute a violation of the law.

A large number of local media outlets survive solely thanks to this money due to the underdeveloped and poor media and advertising market, and this process affects the very survival of the media and the quality of information. Due to political abuses of the existing model of co-financing of media content, this mechanism does not achieve public interest in the field of information, but the public money intended for this is mostly allocated to pro-regime media and phantom pro-regime organizations.

48 UNS, [MIT to explain illogicality in the work of Unique Information System and violations of the law in the field of co-financing](#), UNS, Anem and Local Press, 04.04.2025

49 BIRN, [Public competition database](#), october 2024

50 N1/Beta, [More than a third of local governments announced competitions for media projects after the deadline](#), 05.11.2024

For years, abuses have been highlighted in the selection of commission members, unexplained decisions and awarding projects to media that do not actually implement them or implement them very unprofessionally, and an almost useless, cumbersome and long appeal procedure before the competent Administrative Court, which the dissatisfied almost never use.<sup>51</sup> One of the biggest problems remains the allocation of funds to those media that regularly violate the Code of Journalists of Serbia. Large amounts of money from the competition are received by media that are not known for working in the public interest, or that do not perform their work professionally. Control and evaluation of implemented projects are also problematic.

Other ways of providing subsidies are through direct contracts awarded to media outlets and other legal entities for the implementation of so-called media services, which mainly consist of monitoring the work of local institutions and public enterprises. Funds are also allocated to media outlets through public procurement of media services, direct contracts and agreements on business and technical cooperation with the media, through which, in a simple way and in the absence of clear criteria, unauthorized influence on the media can be achieved.<sup>52</sup>

There are still no clear mechanisms for financing media in national minority languages, and the reason is that there are no mechanisms to ensure media pluralism in minority languages. The LPIM stipulates that part of the funds from the state budget is provided through co-financing or other conditions for the work of media that publish information in national minority languages. Detailed data on exactly how much each minority media outlet received in 2024 are not publicly available, mainly due to the complexity of the distribution through different levels of authority and competitions and, on the other hand, data that is not public. The financing of minority media outlets, especially those under the control of national councils, remains subject to political influence, which affects their independence, as well as the unequal distribution of funds. Some minority media outlets (for example, in Hungarian or Albanian) receive more funds due to their larger population or political representation, while smaller communities (for example, Bunjevci, Vlachs) often receive less funds.<sup>53</sup>

#### — A.5 STATE ADVERTISING IN THE PRIVATE MEDIA SECTOR

There is a widespread practice of public advertising through the media in Serbia. The Law on Advertising and media regulations regulate state advertising in an unclear, incomplete and sparse manner, which leaves numerous legal issues unresolved. The main problem lies in the practical distribution of funds based on these regulations, the criteria used, the selection of media and the question of whether this process threatens the editorial independence of the media. State-owned

51 Jelena Čolović, [Media sued cities and local governments 34 times in 10 years over project co-financing](#), JAS, 25.03.2025.

52 BIRN research, Transparency under scrutiny, [Public procurement for media services](#), 19.04.2024

53 BIRN, [Public competition database](#), October 2024



enterprises and limited liability companies managed by the state fully control their advertising and are considered to be a threat to the media and a tool for their control. The Law on Advertising again does not regulate political and state advertising.<sup>54</sup> The associations believe that the draft Law should have established a legal framework for state advertising and propose the introduction of a number of articles that would, inter alia, oblige state bodies and companies to publicly disclose how much money they spend on advertising and to whom they allocate it. The allocation of funds through public procurement and according to market principles is advocated, however, in practice it primarily focuses on the needs of the economy and the market, and not on the media.<sup>55</sup> In April 2025, a new Law on Advertising was adopted.

The distribution of state funds through advertising is not transparent and fair. Due to the way in which funds are distributed, as well as the lack of clear criteria for their distribution, this mechanism is abused and the money goes mainly to eligible media in various ways. State advertising is not regulated in a way that creates equal market conditions, it is still in a grey area and can greatly disrupt the media market because certain media are significantly favoured.<sup>56</sup> The analysis of spending also raises questions about the purposefulness of public procurement of advertising and marketing services and their real social effect, considering the way in which the funds are directed. Nearly one billion RSD was spent on advertising and promotion contracts for institutions, as documented on the official Public Procurement Portal. The largest portion of these funds (half of the total amount) comes from the "other institutions" sector – state agencies, institutes and similar companies, while smaller amounts come from state administration bodies (local governments and ministries) and public companies.<sup>57</sup>

Institutions do not publish data on the distribution of funds in an appropriate and transparent manner. Mostly, data for which there is a legal obligation is published. In this regard, the Law on Public Information and Media contains provisions relating to the transparency of media data and prescribes which data must be submitted to the Media Register and which are public. The Law further specifies which data should be submitted to the Register, explicitly stating information on public advertising and public notification. Data is also published in the E-Register regarding the granted state aid and on the Public Procurement Portal.<sup>58</sup>

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54 Radmilo Marković i Gordana Andrić, [Media Associations: New Law on Advertising Does Not Resolve the Issue of State Advertising](#), BIRN, 19.10.2024  
55 Nemanja Nenadić, [Proposals for amendments to the Advertising Law](#), Transparency Serbia, October 2024  
56 Tanja Maksić, [How to achieve responsible and ethical media operations in the digital environment](#), BIRN, 02.12.2024  
57 Tanja Maksić, [Transparency under scrutiny, public procurement for media services](#), BIRN, 19.12.2024  
58 [E-register](#) of the Commission for State Aid Control and contract search on the [Public Procurement Portal website](#)

## — A.6 LEGAL PROVISIONS RELATED TO DEFAMATION AND THEIR APPLICATION DO NOT CREATE A CHILLING EFFECT ON JOURNALISTS AND THE MEDIA

Defamation has been decriminalized and the regulations do not provide for provisions specifically protecting the reputation and honour of civil servants and other appointed and designated persons. They can try to protect their rights like all other citizens in Serbia. This has significantly reduced the pressure on journalists in terms of criminal sanctions, but there are still mechanisms by which they can be prosecuted for violating honour and reputation, which can have serious financial and other implications for journalists. Although state officials are not formally privileged, their influence and resources allow them to file lawsuits more often, which creates a perception of greater protection.

The regulations governing the issue of compensation for damage caused by the violation of honour and reputation by the journalists are not strict, but the problem is the way in which these regulations are treated by judges. It is precisely because of this attitude of some judges that a very negative practice began, such as in February 2025, the KRIK portal was convicted by a final judgment following the lawsuit of Minister Gašić in which the judge, contrary to the Law on Public Information and Media, clarified in his judgment that journalists should be more careful because they mention an official who heads the SIA.<sup>59</sup> Prosecutors are increasingly filing claims with high amounts of compensation, which are often disproportionate to the economic situation in Serbia. On the other hand, the amounts awarded for compensation show a certain uniformity in court practice, although they can vary significantly depending on the circumstances of the cases themselves.<sup>60</sup> In court proceedings, there are still challenges related to determining the status of journalists and recognizing the existence of certain media.

In 2024, a total of 699 cases were filed at the Higher Court in Belgrade against journalists, editors and media owners, however, there is still no precise record of how many lawsuits against journalists were actually initiated by state officials and politicians. In 2024, a total of 723 cases filed against journalists in previous years were resolved. There are still 1,268 cases in the resolution process.<sup>61</sup>

According to available information from the media, more than 40 different lawsuits by politicians against journalists and the media have been recorded and publicly known.<sup>62</sup> All the lawsuits filed are not SLAPP lawsuits, as a large number of lawsuits have also been filed against journalists and tabloid media. Several important rulings have been issued, some of which may be a serious setback to the future of freedom of expression in Serbia.

59 [Bojana Jovanović, KRIK sentenced in Gašić's lawsuit: journalists should be more careful because they mention the official who heads the Security Information Agency](#), KRIK, 20.02.2025

60 Safe Journalists, [Media Scene Monitoring Reports for 2024](#), ANEM, 2024 and 2025

61 Information obtained through a request for access to information of public importance submitted to the Higher Court in Belgrade, November 2024, with an amendment in January 2025

62 Sample from media review, [Pressures and attacks](#), Cenolovka website

KRIK journalists Vesna Radojević and Dragana Pećo were acquitted in the first instance proceedings conducted under private criminal charges, which according to the editorial staff of the investigative portal KRIK has a SLAPP character, and was filed by Nikola Petrović, the best man of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and the former director of the "Elektromreža Srbije", of charges that they had collected his personal data without authorization. The complaint relates to KRIK's investigative story "President's Best Man Nikola Petrović Bought an Airline from Stanko Subotić".<sup>63</sup>

In Belgrade, the Court of Appeal upheld the judgment of the Higher Court in the part in which the editor-in-chief of the KRIK portal Stevan Dojčinović and the association that founded that media outlet were obliged to compensate the commander of the Unit for the protection of participants in criminal proceedings of the Ministry of the Interior and two of his associates for non-material damage in the amount of RSD 50,000.00 each, due to the violation of honour and reputation. The text presented the editorial staff's position on the proceedings initiated against them, as well as a short statement by the editor of KRIK, in which the filed lawsuits were assessed as a form of SLAPP pressure on their editorial staff. Under the title of the text "KRIK flooded with lawsuits from people close to the regime", as an illustration of what was stated, photographs of the persons who filed the lawsuits, who are known to be businessmen close to people in power or as people in power, were published. Among them are no photographs of the plaintiffs.<sup>64</sup>

The Court of Appeal in Belgrade rejected the appeal of the editorial staff of the KRIK portal and upheld the first-instance judgment in the dispute brought before the Higher Court in Belgrade by Predrag Koluvija against the founder of KRIK and its editor-in-chief Stevan Dojčinović. Koluvija was awarded damages in the amount of RSD 30,000.00.<sup>65</sup>

In early October, the Higher Court in Belgrade issued a judgment ordering Verica Marinčić, the editor-in-chief of the IN Media portal, to pay (the plaintiff) RSD 100,000.00 in compensation for non-material damage due to the publication of a photo of underage karate fighters as part of an article about packages that were handed to them at a reception with the president of the Inđija Municipality, which contained jars of honey "Fruškogorski Skočko – radost u kući" (Fruška Gora's Skočko – a pleasure behind closed doors), which is also advertised as an aphrodisiac.

The Court of Appeal in Belgrade also upheld the judgment of the Higher Court, which obliged the editor-in-chief Stevan Dojčinović, journalist Milica Vojinović and the publisher of KRIK to pay Bratislav Gašić, the Minister of Defence of the caretaker Government of the Republic of Serbia, who at the time of the publication of the article was the Director of the SIA, the amount of RSD 70,000 as compensation for non-material damage due

63 Jelena Radivojević, [KRIK journalists acquitted after Nikola Petrović's lawsuit](#), KRIK, 24.01.2025

64 Insajder/KRIK, [Second final judgement ruling against KRIK](#), Insajder TV, 19.06.2024

65 KRIK editor office, [KRIK was finally convicted over an article about Koluvija](#), KRIK, 07.06.2025

to the violation of honour and reputation. The journalists filed a Constitutional Appeal and Revision against that judgment.

The defendant journalists and their colleagues are not discouraged from continuing to write critically and research. They are fully aware of the consequences of such lawsuits.<sup>66</sup> The procedures take a very long time, require a lot of preparation and time, journalists have to prepare responses to the lawsuit and prepare for hearings, which takes time away from their daily work and research. Even small monetary demands can completely destroy local media, which are often unable to pay a certain amount without the support of others.<sup>67</sup>

#### — A.7 OTHER LAWS ARE ENFORCED OBJECTIVELY AND ALLOW JOURNALISTS AND OTHER MEDIA ACTORS TO WORK FREELY AND SAFELY

Serbian legislation does not contain any measures regarding SLAPP lawsuits and does not have any special safeguards that would protect journalists, media outlets, or other actors who are the targets of such lawsuits.<sup>68</sup> Serbia has not dealt with these lawsuits, nor has it shown any intention or activity to recognize and introduce anti-SLAPP measures into the legal system. The Serbian legal system recognizes the legal concept of abuse of rights in civil proceedings, the basis of which is the Law on Contract and Torts and the Law on Civil Procedure. Although they are recognized by the civil sector as potentially good defence mechanisms, these legal concepts are very rarely applied. Lawsuits are filed on various grounds, and the most common are for violation of reputation and honour, both due to violation of personal dignity and the right to authenticity, and even due to unfair competition and damage to reputation. In accordance with the Criminal Code, lawsuits are most often filed nowadays for alleged violation of the presumption of innocence, unauthorized collection of personal data, insult, racial and other discrimination.

The number of SLAPP lawsuits in Serbia has been increasing for several years. In 2024, IJAS recorded at least 22 lawsuits with SLAPP elements. Towards the end of the year, a SLAPP database was established and launched, which includes cases recorded so far that have elements of SLAPP lawsuits.<sup>69</sup> Cases are entered into the database in accordance with the Rules on Criteria, which were developed by the newly formed National Working Group as an informal group of associations, non-governmental organizations and independent investigative media, and in accordance with the criteria of the Council of Europe. There is growing discussion about the need to amend legislation to recognize SLAPP lawsuits and to establish criteria for their early dismissal, as well as for judicial responses during the proceedings. However, the civil sector is still

66 Two focus groups of journalists were held in 2025, moderated by Kruna Savović, on March 4 and 5, 2025, and two interviews were conducted on the topic of SLAPP lawsuits, interviewed by Rade Djurić.

67 Ivana Kragulj, [Media outlets facing SLAPP lawsuits can count on legal and financial assistance – however, it is not enough to cover all costs](#), IJAS, 12.08.2024

68 Ana Zdravković, [SLAPP lawsuits, abuse of the right to judicial protection in proceedings in the service of limiting judicial protection](#), Reviewed scientific paper, 14.03.2022

69 National Working Group for Slapp-s, [SLAPP case database in Serbia](#), Civic Initiatives, 2025



distancing itself from these proposals, guided by the negative practice of improving other regulations and failures in their implementation, which has led to an even worse situation.

Serbia is a socio-political system in which there is constant and continuous abuse of discriminatory and arbitrary application of other laws with the aim of intimidating journalists. Representatives of the authorities particularly use the police and security services to exert the greatest pressure on journalists. The actions of these services also have the greatest consequences.<sup>70</sup>

The most specific case is the accusation against Savo Majstorov, Danijela Mirkov and Sara Mikić as organizers of the blockades in Sombor. In April 2024, misdemeanour proceedings were initiated against the aforementioned individuals, on suspicion that, without prior written notification to the Ministry of the Interior, they "organized a public gathering of about 200 citizens who were on the road and thus completely blocked public traffic".<sup>71</sup> The principal of an elementary school in Bujanovac filed criminal charges against Ivana Jovanović, a journalist for the Bujanovačke portal, for writing about the reconstruction of the school. The police came to the premises of this portal upon the report to take a statement from the journalist. Dejan Ilić, a columnist for the Peščanik portal, was detained in April 2025, and the Third Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade stated that, "due to false claims made through the media," a detention order was issued on suspicion that he committed the criminal offense of causing panic and disorder by "making false claims" during his appearance on the Nova TV show "Pokreni se" on 29 March 2025. Ilić was later released and criminal charges for causing panic and disorder were filed against him.<sup>72</sup>

Journalists were arrested in 2024 in staged cases in which procedures were abused by the police and security services, and their telephones were also confiscated.<sup>73</sup> They were charged with suspected violations and crimes that were never proven (examples of Slaviša Milanov and Ljubomir Stefanović), which is why they hired lawyers to represent them in criminal proceedings and internal control proceedings against the police and the SIA. Journalists are required to show their ID at events by the police and are often charged with misdemeanours for disturbing public order or disobeying traffic regulations.

In Serbia, at least 22 SLAPP lawsuits were registered in 2024. Journalist Verica Marinčić was sued seven times for publishing a photo taken from a municipal website showing children – karate fighters who received a jar of honey with an aphrodisiac as one of the prizes.<sup>74</sup> Marinčić has already been convicted in the first instance in the first lawsuit, and a similar fate is expected in other proceedings. The research portal KRIK has

70 Civic Initiatives, [Report on Three Freedoms](#), Civic Initiatives, 25.12.2024

71 SO Info, [Sava Majstorov, SLAPP lawsuits before the misdemeanour court due to blockades](#), Voice, 31.12.2024

72 N1 Belgrade, [Columnist Dejan Ilić summoned for talks at the Ministry of Interior](#), N1Info, 2025

73 MFRR, [Media Freedom Rapid Response Report for 2024](#), ESPMF, EFJ, IPI, February 2025

74 Autonomia Info/In Media ["All possible pressures": Seven SLAPP lawsuits attempt to silence IN Media](#), 08.10..2025

been sued twice this year by powerful people and politicians. First, initial lawsuits were filed for written texts, and soon after, new lawsuits were filed for KRIK's publications in which they alleged that SLAPP lawsuits had been filed against them. At the end of May 2024, KRIK was sued twice by judge Dušanka Đorđević and her lawyer husband, first in civil proceedings for violation of honour and reputation due to the publication of data on the judge's assets in the Judges' Assets Database.<sup>75</sup> Immediately afterwards, criminal charges were filed against the editor and journalists of KRIK for misuse of personal data. KRIK was sued in early 2025 for publishing an article about former politician and director of a public company Jelena Tanasković, and immediately after informing the public that they were being sued, they received a new lawsuit from Tanasković for publishing information that a SLAPP lawsuit had been filed against them.<sup>76</sup> The BIRN portal has been sued several times by Mayor Aleksandar Šapić, in consecutive lawsuits. Journalists say that they can now almost guess which cases they will be sued for. In 2024, 4 cases that were recorded as SLAPP lawsuits were resolved. The majority of the proceedings are still ongoing.<sup>77</sup>

#### — A.8 CONFIDENTIALITY OF JOURNALISTS' SOURCES IS GUARANTEED IN THE LEGISLATION AND RESPECTED BY THE AUTHORITIES

Journalists' sources are guaranteed and protected by regulations. A journalist is not obliged to reveal the source of information, except for data relating to a criminal offence, or the perpetrator of a criminal offence for which the penalty is imprisonment for a term of at least five years, if the data for that criminal offence cannot be obtained in any other way, nor is it permitted to endanger the free flow of information by exerting pressure, threatening or blackmailing the source of information.<sup>78</sup> The Criminal Code also protects the source of information and states that they shall not be considered the perpetrator of a criminal offence for not disclosing the identity of the author of the information or the source of information to the court or other competent authority, except in the case of a criminal offence for which the minimum penalty is imprisonment for a term of five or more years, or this is necessary to prevent the commission of such a criminal offence.<sup>79</sup> The Journalists' Code of Ethics in Serbia emphasizes that journalists are obliged to respect the source's request for anonymity. Anonymity should be granted only to sources who can provide important data or first-hand information, or documents of public interest.<sup>80</sup> Unfortunately, in practice, the situation is much more difficult than in previous years. At least two arrests of journalists in fake proceedings aimed at physically accessing their mobile devices and more suspicions of interception of communications in other cases, such as the Pegasus software attack on BIRN journalists' devices or attempts to monitor the communications of European Western Balkans journalists, speak of attempts

75 Jelena Radivojević, [Judge sues KRIK, seeks imprisonment for journalists and ban on work](#), KRIK, 30.05.2024

76 Sofija Parojčić, [Tanasković sues KRIK again – because we announced that she was suing us](#), KRIK, 06.02.2025

77 National Working Group for SLAPP-a, [SLAPP case database in Serbia](#), Civic Initiatives, January 2025

78 Law on Public Information and Media

79 Criminal Code

80 Press Council, [Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics](#), 09.01.2025

by competent institutions and government officials to gain access to journalists' communications.<sup>81</sup> The most likely target is journalists' source of information. In addition, police officers and prosecutors openly ask journalists questions about their sources during proceedings. State authorities, organized by the Ministry of the Interior, are preparing a new Draft Law on Internal Affairs, as the identity of journalists' sources was seriously compromised in the previous two drafts.<sup>82</sup> This law is being prepared in secret, without a public procedure and the participation of non-governmental organizations, so already acquired rights will be seriously affected.

Journalists do not feel free and safe to seek access to sources of information, and especially to maintain further contact with them. It is repeatedly confirmed that some of the reasons for monitoring journalists are their sources of information.

In 2024, there are serious suspicions that there were direct attempts to uncover sources or pressure journalists to disclose information about their sources. Journalists, activists and students were detained or summoned for talks, during which their mobile devices were confiscated, on which communication monitoring tools were then installed. In most cases, the individuals were released or subjected only to brief talks during which certain information was collected. However, the real objective of MIA and SIA representatives appeared to be gaining access to their mobile devices.<sup>83</sup> It is suspected that the real reason was to access communication and monitor it, whereby, especially in the case of journalists, the goal was to be a source of information and further communication by journalists regarding the stories they present on their portals. According to the information available, from November 2024 to February 2025, over 750 attempts were made to monitor mobile and other devices of journalists, activists and students. The tools used were Cellebrite and Pegasus, after which the domestic Serbian-made NoviSpy software was installed. Based on the evidence obtained, civil society organizations presented key information about the forced unlocking and infection with spyware of the phones of journalists, activists and members of civil society. After that, requests will be presented to the competent domestic and international institutions for the initiation of specific procedures. When it comes to journalists in particular, the cases of Slaviša Milanov, Ljubomir Stefanović and two BIRN journalists are known and recorded so far.<sup>84</sup> Another form of attempt to find out the sources of information for investigative journalists are SLAPP lawsuits. At most trials of BIRN or KRIK journalists, the Mayor of Belgrade Aleksandar Šapić, through his lawyers, asks the journalists he is suing about their sources, and it is believed that the main goal of his lawsuits is actually to find out the journalists' sources.<sup>85</sup>

81 Aleksa Tešić, [Two BIRN women journalists targeted by Pegasus spy programme](#), BIRN, 29.02.2025.

82 E-consultation, [Deadline for the completion of tasks for the working group by 31 January 2025, Draft Law on Internal Affairs](#), Mol, December 2024

83 Security Lab Amnesty, [Serbia: Authorities use Cellebrite spyware and forensic tools to hack journalists and activists](#), Amnesty International, 16.12.2024

84 SafeJournalists/Cenzolovka, [SafeJournalists: Pegasus against women journalists in Serbia – an unacceptable weapon to silence them](#), SafeJournalists Network, 28.03.2025

85 Vesna Radojević/KRIK, [Belgrade Mayor Aleksandar Šapić tried to reveal who their source was at BIRN's trial](#), Raskrikavanje, 23.09.2024

Due to new technologies and surveillance possibilities, journalists must undertake continuous training and improvement of the measures they take. Editorial staff must adapt and acquire new tools, different trainings, to cooperate with other actors. However, these improvements additionally affect their core work. Journalists are distrustful of the competent authorities that are supposed to protect them and direct a large part of their resources to protection from these institutions. Unfortunately, the competent authorities still do not conduct investigations into suspicions of monitoring and filming of journalists, students and activists.

#### — A.9 JOURNALISTS ARE FREE TO PURSUIT THEIR PROFESSION AND TO ESTABLISH, JOIN AND PARTICIPATE IN THEIR ASSOCIATIONS

Journalists in Serbia do not need to have a license to practice journalism. They are not limited by special permits related to work licenses. Institutions and the majority of the journalistic community have accepted a broad understanding of the definition of a journalist in accordance with the Council of Europe guidelines. However, it is still mentioned that certain situations and the position of journalists could be better regulated if a definition of a journalist were introduced. The journalistic community is seriously afraid that such a definition would be abused and reduce the acquired journalistic freedoms. Pressures and attempts to put into perspective the consideration of licensing journalists have continued, although not direct. The Working Group for Amendments to the Law on Public Information and Media has once again reiterated the request to introduce a definition of journalists and media workers.<sup>86</sup>

Journalists, especially investigative portals and independent media, both in large cities and in local communities, have had numerous problems and difficulties in cooperation and communication with state institutions. IJAS has recorded over 40 cases where journalists have been hindered in their work in various ways or have been denied access to and reporting on certain events, as well as cases of non-invitation to press conferences or events of public interest.<sup>87</sup> Journalists have been hindered by other persons, denied access or thrown out of the premises of institutions. In local communities, this is a huge problem and there is direct pressure on the work of these media because the survival of these media depends on local news. Verica Marinčić was physically attacked and thrown out of the premises of the local city administration, and she has been repeatedly denied access to local sessions, Miroslav Mijatović from the Pakt portal is regularly denied entry to local sessions, and media such as N1 and Nova S and other local media have repeatedly been denied entry to events in Novi Sad, Niš, Valjevo and other cities.

86 IJAS, [Database on attacks and pressure](#), january 2025

87 Two focus groups of journalists were held in January 2025, moderator Kruna Savović, March 4 and 5, 2025

There were no recorded cases of journalists encountering obstacles or pressure to join any journalistic associations. Journalist and media associations that are supported by the largest number of journalists are very active in protecting the professional and labour rights of journalists, providing support and legal assistance, as well as through various working groups and in working on media policies, amending laws, and advocating for a more favourable environment for the work of journalists and the media.

A group of so-called GONGO associations is active and operates in Serbia, which hinder the work of relevant associations. These associations are only and especially active during processes conducted by state authorities, such as the process of amending and supplementing regulations, or when they make announcements on certain topics aimed at garnering government supports. The negative role of GONGO organisations is also visible in the process of allocating funds through project co-financing of media content of public interest. One of the main problems of this process are the expert committees, and the problem, according to experts, is that committee members often come from GONGO organizations, parallel journalist and media associations, which, as they point out, do not appear in public except when they need to delegate members to the committee.

#### — A.10 RIGHT TO ACCESS OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS AND INFORMATION

Journalists in Serbia often access data held by institutions and use access to information of public importance. In many situations, due to the lack of published reports or other administrative acts that institutions are obliged to share with the public, this is their only option. Journalists state that obtaining information depends on the subject of the request. Current and important information about government officials, public office holders, major projects or businesses is generally not available. The range of available information is narrowing, and transparency is declining. Journalists have difficulty obtaining official information, abuses of the right to access information of public importance are becoming more common, and the legislator is seeking to increase the discretionary rights of institutions to withhold information.<sup>88</sup> The most unresponsive institution for information seekers remains the Government of the Republic of Serbia, which consistently demands applicants to clarify their requests—even when they are already precise—and then refuses to provide the information. The media make up one of the largest groups of complainants in proceedings before the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance. Of particular concern is the fact that as many as 40.98% of journalist complaints filed with the Commissioner in 2024 were filed due to the “silence” of public authorities. The percentage of unenforced decisions of the Commissioner on complaints from journalists and media representatives is

88 NUNS/Partners Serbia, Information of public importance, [Information of public importance](#), [Access to information of public importance](#), Partners Serbia, 09.09.2024



31.94% and is higher than the general trend of 22.02% when it comes to other complainants.<sup>89</sup> Journalists are denied very sensitive information such as environmental information, information on capital projects, the use of public funding, public funds, co-financing of media projects, legalization of illegally constructed facilities. The number of unenforced decisions of the Commissioner on complaints from journalists and media representatives is higher than the general trend (22.02%) when it comes to other complainants. When we add to this the fact that as many as 40.98% of journalist complaints filed with the Commissioner in 2024 were filed due to the “silence” of public authorities (75 complaints out of a total of 183 complaints filed by journalists), it is clear that journalists have great difficulty obtaining information.

The Government and ministries are not sufficiently open, but the communication and relationship with journalists and information seekers themselves depends on the ministry.<sup>90</sup> In Serbia, there are no strategic documents that would regulate the transparency and openness of the institutions themselves that implement regulations that require full openness. The openness of the Serbian Parliament towards the public is 57.24%, the Government 54.94%, and even the judicial authorities cannot boast of regular reporting on their work and budget spending. Of the previous 25 ministries (the 2024 RS Government), the best results were achieved by the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Defence, both with an openness index of 74.98%, followed by the Ministry of Education with 71.25%. The Government and ministries are open to pro-government, especially tabloid media. Data is forwarded as needed, with the intention of discrediting or targeting campaigns against the media, journalists, and activists.<sup>91</sup> For example, one of the Government administrations – the Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering – most likely came into possession of information that should not be subject to public scrutiny, but this information was forwarded to tabloids, which publish, as needed. Police officers consciously and regularly forward reports from their actions, so tabloids come into possession of such data even half an hour after it was compiled, often before public prosecutors.

Courts are generally transparent. To a large extent, openness depends on the openness of individual courts and their presidents, the scope and sensitivity of information that is made public. Some courts are prompt and detailed in the responses they provide, others have dozens of orders for failure to execute the Commissioner’s decisions. Other courts again grant journalists access to information without any requests for access. Some courts have excellent media access to courtrooms and trials and a good relationship with communication staff, while others hardly respond to requests for access.

89 [Report of the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection for 2024](#), Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, March 2025

90 Open institutions CDTMN, [Transparency of legislative, judicial and executive authorities in Serbia. State vow of silence](#). Report of the Partners Serbia, BIF, January 2024

91 Jelena Zorić and Gordana Andrić, [Why is information about government critics leaking?](#) BIRN, 2024

In Serbia, media access to trials is allowed. Each court has its own rules on access, and these permissions, although provided for by law, depend on the individual permission of the judges and the technical capabilities of the courts and courtrooms. Journalists can generally attend trials, but filming and bringing cameras in is only possible with prior notice and approval from individual judges. Out of 66 basic courts, eight still do not have their own websites, and out of 44 misdemeanour courts, only one does not have this communication channel. On the other hand, all higher courts, basic and higher prosecutors' offices have websites. However, most of them do not regularly publish news on their websites. They are also not used to holding press conferences.

In Serbia, public access to parliamentary sessions—including access for journalists—is generally allowed. The National Assembly serves as a relatively better example, whereas in local assemblies across cities and municipalities, there are numerous cases of journalists being denied attendance, particularly those who report critically on local authorities. The number of access bans alone exceeds several hundred, and data has been recorded that some journalists have been denied access in at least 30 cases. Access bans have increased sharply since December 2024, after the spread of student, pupil and citizen protests in local areas. The National Assembly of Serbia has an openness rating of 57.24%, and the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina 24.86%.<sup>92</sup> At the end of 2024 and in 2025, the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina began to ban access to citizens interested in attending sessions, while it almost banned access to journalists, and in several cases even forcibly limited and denied movement and exit from the premises.<sup>93</sup> The biggest problems are still in local areas. Journalists who criticize the actions of the authorities in the city municipality of Grocka in Belgrade have been denied access. Miroslav Mijatović from Loznica has been denied access to local sessions of the Loznica assembly or city council dozens of times. Verica Marinčić in Inđija is selectively allowed to attend events and local sessions, and journalists in Bor and Zaječar often have no access to local sessions and meetings.

92 Open institutions CDTMN, [Openness of the legislative authorities in Serbia](#), CDTMN and Partners Serbia, 2024

93 Beta, [Incidents in the Vojvodina Assembly, budget adopted without debate](#), 17.12.2024

## B. JOURNALISTS' POSITION IN THE NEWSROOMS

### — B.1 THE JOB POSITIONS OF JOURNALISTS ARE STABLE AND PROTECTED AT THE WORKPLACE

The social and economic position of journalists and media workers in Serbia in 2024 remains extremely unfavourable, marked by insecure working conditions and limited labour rights. Almost half of engaged journalists still work without a permanent contract of employment, while almost a quarter work part-time, often without the right to sick leave, paid vacation or social insurance. The most vulnerable are journalists engaged outside of employment, in temporary fixed-term contracts and temporary service contracts, who often perform the tasks of permanent employees without legal protection.

In 2024, Radio Television of Serbia officially allocated RSD 567,930,000 or about EUR 4.8 million for compensation under author's contracts, temporary service contracts and author's fees. More than RSD 128 million or about EUR 1.1 million are costs for temporary fixed-term contracts.<sup>94</sup> At RT Vojvodina, 135 journalists were allowed to transfer to permanent contracts, but at least 15% of employees still work on precarious contracts, and are considered to be under serious pressure.<sup>95</sup> During 2024, at least 53 new workers were hired at RTS on part-time contracts, making them a very vulnerable category susceptible to blackmail and manipulation.

Of particular concern is the position of young journalists who are exposed to constant pressure due to part-time work and financial uncertainty, which negatively affects their mental health.<sup>96</sup> Freelancers remain "invisible" to the legislation, faced with a very precarious status of self-employment or work through agencies, which makes them an extremely vulnerable category.<sup>97</sup> Low salaries, unpaid overtime, non-compliance with working hours and instability of the media force journalists to work in multiple newsrooms or work in other sectors unrelated to journalism.<sup>98</sup> The average net salary of journalists at RTS in 2024 is about RSD 100,000, while at RTV there is a problem of discrimination in salaries for the same positions. Amendments to the Law on Public Information and Media from 2023 introduced the so-called concept of "standby", which allows for the measurement and compensation of overtime hours, but the effects have yet to be seen.

Journalists and media workers in Serbia face extremely difficult working conditions, which have been worsening year by year. Low salaries, non-compliance with working hours, unpaid overtime, uncertainty regarding the survival of the media, pressures from various sources and negative impact on mental health are the key problems they face and lead to a precarious status. Poor conditions in newsrooms, limited media

94 RTS, [Public Information Handbook on the work of RTS, Financial data](#), July 2025

95 JAS, [Today is the last working day for 102 journalists and media workers at RTV](#), Cenolovka, 01.09.2024

96 JAS, [Jakovljević \(Magločistač\): Financial uncertainty is the biggest burden for independent journalism](#), Cenolovka, 2024

97 Sinos, [Mario Reljanović: Journalists worry about other people's labour rights, but they don't know their own at all](#), Cenolovka, 2024

98 SINOS survey: [Half of journalists burn out at work, and salaries are low](#), Sinos, 2024

freedom and various types of pressures further aggravate the situation. Due to financial uncertainty, many journalists are forced to work in multiple media outlets or to engage in jobs outside journalism in order to secure basic livelihoods. The reasons cited for leaving journalism include the inability to progress, the poor media situation and inadequate working conditions. A large number of journalists in local communities work additional jobs, which enable them to survive and continue to work almost free of charge for their media outlets.

According to data for 2024, the average net salary of RTV employees was RSD 86,000, while the average net salary of journalists was RSD 82,000 (data obtained upon request for access to information of public importance). At RTS, according to available data in relation to the number of employees, the average salary paid was around RSD 135,000, with differences for certain positions.<sup>99</sup>

There is no signed sectoral collective agreement in Serbia that would provide better conditions for journalists and media workers, however, the need for the adoption of a sectoral collective agreement is emphasized. Private media do not have their own collective agreements. Two public service broadcasters – RTS and RTV, Radio-Television Kragujevac and the newspaper Magyar Szó, do have them.

## — B.2 EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE IN THE PRIVATE MEDIA

Only a small number of media outlets have internal regulations that regulate their internal organization, separating the editorial staff from the owner, while a larger number of media outlets do not have such regulations.

Given the legal provision governing the implementation of rules regarding the internal organization of media that are mandatory for adoption (in effect from 1 January 2025), the Media Coalition has developed a set of internal acts that are part of the process of implementing the Media Strategy in the field of self-regulation and provides for the development of organizational acts by the media themselves.<sup>100</sup> Editorial independence is guaranteed and additionally strengthened by the obligation of the publisher to draft and publish a document that provides for measures and procedures for the protection of editorial policy, all with the aim of protecting the freedom of public information.

A major problem remains that editorial boards, i.e., editorial policy, are under great influence of owners, but also of external factors, which are the result of various political and financial interests.

99 Directors of RTS business units earn 152,078.06 dinars, executive directors earn 123,648.61 dinars, chief and responsible editors 134,066.25 dinars, service managers 101,095.20 dinars, and heads of departments 81,018.35 dinars. In RTV, the director earns 211,000 dinars, while the salaries of unit directors range from 141,000 to 155,000 dinars.

100 Media Coalition, [Proposal for a set of internal media acts: The documents represent a framework for the highest professional standards and are part of the process of implementing the Media Strategy in the field of self-regulation](#), Paragraf, 2024

The Journalists' Code of Ethics of Serbia also guarantees editorial independence, and emphasizes that the economic and political interests of the publisher must not influence the editorial policy in a way that would result in inaccurate, biased, incomplete and untimely information to the public, and that the publisher/owner should not change the editorial policy of the media at his own discretion, without the consent of the editorial board.

For many years, influence on editorial policy has been exerted in various ways through state money spent in the media sector through various mechanisms (project co-financing, direct contracts, public and other procurements, state advertising and promotional activities). Editorial staff are dependent on the influence of the owners and the needs of the marketing departments that generate income, and the entire work of the editorial board is almost reduced to the financial position and profit of the media itself.

The vast majority of private media do not have codes of ethics and accept the ethical rules set out in the Journalists' Code of Ethics of Serbia, which was adopted by the two largest journalist associations, IJAS and JAS. The Code has been amended, so that the new one came into force on 1 January 2025. The Press Council has also adopted Guidelines for the Implementation of the Code of Ethics of Journalists of Serbia in the Online Environment.<sup>101</sup> Members of the Association of Online Media apply the Code of Ethics of the Association of Online Media.<sup>102</sup> Although the exact number is not known, a small number of private media outlets have internal codes. In cooperation with the Press Council, internal codes have been introduced in several private media. These are the Beta agency, Lozničke novosti, Sremske novine and the Media and Reform Center Niš.

The Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics has finally been amended. The Press Council's Complaints Commission shall act in accordance with a new self-regulatory act, starting in January 2025.<sup>103</sup> The key changes relate to respect for dignity, artificial intelligence and social networks, journalist independence, privacy and personal data, the introduction of gender-sensitive language and digital challenges. A new chapter "Respect for Dignity" has been introduced into the Code. The amendments also include guidelines on reporting on minors, as well as on vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, national minorities, LGBT citizens. A new provision has also been introduced that "a journalist shall not report from funerals, except in the case of highly positioned public figures". Provisions have also been included that regulate the right to be forgotten, the use of artificial intelligence and the use of content from social networks, as well as provisions that provide for editorial control, but also liability for content created using artificial intelligence. The media is obliged to label content created using the aforementioned tools. The chapter dealing with the issue of journalist independence emphasizes

101 Press Council, [Guidelines for the application of the Serbian Journalists' Code in the online environment 2.0](#), 09.01.2024

102 AOM, [Online Media Association Code of Ethics](#), BIRN, 2023.

103 Ivo Čolović, [The new Code of Ethics of Journalists of Serbia has come into force](#), December 2024, IJAS



independence from corporate interests. The privacy section has been significantly improved, and readers must be informed about whether prior or subsequent moderation will be used.

In addition to the numerous pressures they face from various sides, journalists in private media also suffer from various types of internal pressures, driven by the interests of the owners and the editorial policy of a particular media outlet. The most common reasons for these pressures are political and financial in nature and are related to the pursuit of profit in private media outlets. In order to survive in the market, media owners often adapt their editorial policies to larger players, primarily external factors, advertisers. Among the main reasons influencing self-censorship in newsrooms, journalists pointed to undue influence from owners (with 44.1% agreeing to some extent that this contributes to self-censorship), but also economic pressures to a large extent (as 62.7% of respondents believe these pressures significantly impact the occurrence of self-censorship). The pressure is most often political and financial in nature, primarily on the editors themselves, who are expected to exert further pressure on journalists.<sup>104</sup>

Student protests and university blockades in Serbia have also sparked public dissatisfaction that has spilled over to editors and journalists in numerous media outlets. In media outlets controlled by owners who support the ruling regime, dismissals are threatened, and often dismissals are handed out. For example, Tara Đukić, a former editor at Elle magazine, was fired for refusing to remove articles from the portal.<sup>105</sup> After 14 years of work at the company Novosti, journalist Vojislava Crnjanski Spasojević had her employment contract terminated – just one day after she posted a photo of herself from a student and civic protest in front of the Constitutional Court on her personal Instagram profile and ten days after she publicly, on the same profile, distanced herself from the disclosure of the personal data of two students on the Večernje novosti portal.<sup>106</sup>

### — B.3 EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA

The Law on Public Service Broadcasting stipulates the editorial independence of public service broadcasters, and the statutes of RTS and RTV provide for the independence of editorial policy and the prohibition of any form of censorship or unlawful influence on the editorial staff and journalists. Radio Television of Serbia has been implementing its Code of Ethics for two years. The document regulates the standards of conduct of employees, based on respect for human dignity and human rights. The Code provides for provisions on conflict of interest, the prohibition of the use of confidential information and business opportunities for personal gain, as well as professional standards and ethical principles. Within the framework of public service broadcasters, there are no special internal organizational rules that would ensure greater independence

104 BIRN, [Internal media security protocols](#), Birn, 2024

105 N1 Belgrade [Editor fired from ELLE: Publisher denies supporting students is the reason](#), N1 Info, 15.01.2024

106 N1 Belgrade, [Novosti journalist fired a day after publishing her photo from the protest](#), N1 Info, 21.01.2024

of editorial staff from management bodies. Rules that would separate editors from management departments are not respected. The biggest problem in the work of public service broadcasters is the pronounced political bias in all areas where certain decisions are made, especially in reporting on politically significant events. The public broadcaster's programme, especially in the news sections, is characterized by a clear lack of political pluralism. When creating content, they rely exclusively on one-sided information, without including different perspectives. The bias manifested itself through focusing on pseudo-events and topics of importance to the government, while minimizing or completely excluding opposition voices.<sup>107</sup>

Public broadcasters' workers who try to do their jobs professionally and critically are under great pressure. RTS News Editor Tamara Tankosić is dealing with enormous professional and personal problems related to exercising her right to work and fulfilling her work obligations.<sup>108</sup> Although employed as an editor, Tamara has not yet been given the opportunity to edit programmes. She only receives work assignments a few times a year. Work proposals are very often ignored by her superiors, and when some of the assignments are approved, the production process later becomes complicated and slows down. Despite numerous pressures and mobbing at work, the journalist does not give up, trying to fight for the best possible labour and legal position within the public service broadcaster.<sup>109</sup>

As part of the protests of dissatisfied citizens and students, an informal group of journalists and media workers at RTS, "Our pRoTeSt", has been established and is operating, highlighting dissatisfaction with the work of the editorial part of the news programme and serious pressure on employees who disagree with the editorial policy and support for the SNS regime. This group includes several prominent journalists who are under great pressure.<sup>110</sup>

There have been worrying verbal pressures on RTS from government officials, especially the President and other high-ranking government officials.<sup>111</sup> In the midst of student protests and dissatisfaction with reporting on mass protests and events in Serbia that the public has a legitimate interest in knowing about, numerous pressures from the ruling party have intensified, reminding RTS employees and the editorial staff that they must remain on the side of government officials. The Serbian Progressive Party has repeatedly called RTS's reporting on the protests scandalous and assessed that all the rules and values of objective and impartial journalism have been violated. The most illustrative example is the insult of RTS correspondent from Niš Lidija Georgiev and her colleague Dejan Tasić by the President of Serbia, who, dissatisfied with her reporting on the student protests in Niš, called the journalist

107 CRTA, [Discussion table on public service broadcasting](#), 24.10.2024

108 NUNS, [RTS unions demand solution to editor Tamara Tankosić's labour rights issue](#), IJAS, 2025

109 Birodi, [We call on the RTS editorial board to stop denying journalist Tamara Tankosić her right to work!](#), Birodi, 2025

110 Informal group of RTS workers, [Our pRoTeSt](#), 2024

111 CRTA, [Discussion table on media regulation](#), 24.10.2024

an imbecile.<sup>112</sup> After that, the President issued an alleged apology, but continued to insult and belittle RTS journalists in the same tone. This is not the first time that the President and other government representatives have rudely insulted and put pressure on journalists from public service broadcasters.

#### — B.4 EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE IN THE NOT-FOR-PROFIT MEDIA SECTOR

With the amendments to the Law on Public Information and Media, this law has included certain provisions on civil sector media. They are recognized as media that provide their services in the public interest, in order to satisfy the specific interests of certain social groups and citizen organizations. There are few traditional non-profit media in Serbia, while we have a larger number of online media outlets that function as non-profit. Non-profit media in Serbia are mainly founded by civil society organizations and are mostly media that employ a small number of journalists. These are mainly media that respect professional standards and deal with topics of public interest that are neglected in traditional media. When it comes to electronic civil society media, the provisions of the Law on Public Service Broadcasting also apply, which relate to the obligations of public service media providers in achieving the general interest. Journalists cite space for free and critical thinking, analytical reporting, independent journalism and quality information as reasons for establishing non-profit media.<sup>113</sup> Also, what sets these media apart are analytical and critical content, stories and topics that focus on ordinary citizens, copyrighted content that is in the interest of the community, not profit, and the opening of socio-political topics that are generally kept quiet. Finances are cited as the biggest problem in the functioning of these media, and due to the lack of funds, the problem of a lack of staff also arises. These media are not financially sustainable and stable.

Very few non-profit media outlets have internal codes of ethics. Non-profit media outlets generally adhere to the Code of Ethics of Journalists of Serbia. Some of them have developed internal documents that further regulate their work.<sup>114</sup>

The Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia – CINS, Insajder, Balkan Investigative Network – BIRN and the KRIK portal have developed their own internal acts, and BIRN also has its own code of ethics. In addition to these media outlets, the Storyteller portal also has an internal code that was developed in cooperation with the Press Council. It focuses on reporting on human, minority, women's rights, the rights of marginalized groups, as well as emphasizing the importance of journalistic creativity and proactivity. Also, in cooperation with the Press Council, internal codes were developed by the Magločistač portal and TV Info puls Vranje. The development of internal codes of ethics was recognized as necessary due to varying circumstances in individual

112 Ljubica Jocić, [Objective report by RTS journalists from Niš and insults to Vučić: Students, JAS, colleagues condemn, public service does not](#), Južne vesti, 02.03.2025

113 IJAV/NDNV, Research, [Challenges to the sustainability of civil society media](#), Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina, 2024

114 Press Council, [Press Council Work Report for 2024](#), part relating to guidelines and activities, January 2025

newsrooms, the specific focus of reporting, and internal dynamics such as management-journalist relationships.

Non-profit media and their journalists have been the most frequent targets of various types of attacks and pressures, insults, targeting, threats and assaults in recent years. They are under pressure from the highest government officials, including being portrayed negatively and targeted, as well as smear campaigns by tabloid media sympathetic to the authorities—particularly during prime-time shows on media with national coverage. Additionally, these journalists endure organised harassment and insults on social media platforms. Also, in the last few years, they have been exposed to constant lawsuits. The most drastic example is the lawsuits filed against the KRIK editorial staff. In addition to the pressures all journalists face, women journalists endure extra challenges—an especially concerning issue given that investigative media editorial teams in Serbia are predominantly female. A woman journalist in the focus groups pointed out that it seems to her that “investigative journalism is profiled in society as the only true journalism”, which she considers very wrong and notes that this additionally targets investigative journalists as enemies.

## — B.5 FREEDOM OF JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWS PRODUCTION PROCESS

When it comes to the freedom to choose the topics on which journalists will work, the situation has not changed compared to previous years. Freedom depends primarily on the media in which the journalists are engaged, i.e. the organization and editorial policy implemented in that media. As in previous years, the greatest freedom is in investigative and non-profit media, where journalists and editors most often decide together on the stories they prepare. Female journalists believe that, regarding journalistic freedom, the situation is unfavorable—even within independent media: “It may seem that in some media, especially those that consider themselves free, there is no censorship or self-censorship, but the situation is actually a little different. Topics are often rejected if they do not suit the editorial board or management, although it seems like a joint decision in agreement with the journalist.”

Journalists and their work are influenced by various factors, some to a greater extent and some to a lesser extent. Journalists are greatly influenced by the general situation on the media scene and the conditions in which journalists work, primarily the economic situation. The vast majority of journalists believe that economic pressures influence their work by leading to self-censorship.<sup>115</sup> Self-censorship has affected their journalistic work and the quality of information they have shared with the public, and the main factors that influence self-censorship are economic and political pressures, government interference, and undue influence by owners is a factor that divides journalists. Journalists testify that they had to make certain concessions. In order to secure sufficient

115 BOS, [Media in Serbia: Between European standards and domestic reality](#), Belgrade Open School, October, 2024

funds for their media outlet or perhaps for their personal livelihood, journalists often turn a blind eye to censorship and self-censorship, lacking the freedom to address certain topics as they really should. If they “object”, most often to the authorities, they are left without clients, advertisers, but also without the opportunity to receive funds in project competitions

As in previous years, journalists in Serbia most often do not report censorship. What stands out in the last few years is that self-censorship is much more present and represents one of the problems that greatly affect the work of journalists.<sup>116</sup> Women journalists often report that they have been in this situation once or more.<sup>117</sup>

Self-censorship depends a lot on the media in which the journalist works and the fact that journalists know in advance what they are allowed and what they are not allowed to write. Quote from one respondent: “I believe journalists are well aware of what they should and shouldn’t write, and how they should write it. The question is whether they will produce glowing praise or focus on peripheral issues instead of the core ones. When specific explanations or accusations are made at a press conference, how many will report them directly—and how many will bury them in the fifth paragraph, leaving them out of the headline and lead altogether? There are often subtle manipulations in the very way news is constructed.”<sup>118</sup>

## — B.6 WORKING POSITION OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS

Female journalists in Serbia often work in more challenging and difficult conditions than their male counterparts, particularly due to gender-specific pressures, societal expectations and professional barriers. Women journalists, especially those in investigative roles or in leadership positions, face increased risks of harassment, including verbal attacks online, anonymous threats and smear campaigns. Female journalists often balance multiple roles that include, on the one hand, an important family role and demands, and, on the other hand, work obligations that include working during holidays or weekends. Women are more likely to experience gender-based harassment and societal expectations that exacerbate work-life conflicts. Women in Serbia hold only 32% of managerial roles and face systemic barriers to higher-paying positions, indicating lower earning potential. Only a few women journalists, who are in leadership positions, can count on high salaries and opportunities, while salaries for female journalists in most sectors do not differ from those of their colleagues.

Although there are more women employed in the media, men are still more represented in higher, editorial positions. Research

116 Those who had such an experience cited fear for personal safety (23.7%), ethical dilemmas about whether to report it or not (21.6%), and pressure from employers or superiors (17.5%). Worryingly, the analyses showed that self-censorship affected their work and the quality of information. As many as 68.7% of journalists believe that self-censorship affected their journalistic work and the quality of information they shared with the public, of which 28.1% say that it affected them by not publishing a story they planned to publish, 26.6% stated that self-censorship limited the scope and importance of the story, and for 14.1% of them, self-censorship led to a lack of key information for the public.

117 Tijana Blagojev i Duško Medić, Research [Observations and attitudes of women in managerial positions in local media](#), Local Press, February 2024

118 Two journalists focus groups were organized in 2025, moderator Kruna Savović, March 4 and 5, 2025.



confirms this trend that has been present for years. More than 60 percent of people employed in the media are women, and only 18 percent of them are editors-in-chief, mainly on online portals, while there are no women editors-in-chief in the print media. At Radio Television Serbia, "all key positions are held by men, although in production women make up more than 70 percent", while the situation at Radio Television Vojvodina is "somewhat better". Women in Serbia hold only 32% of managerial positions in the media. Women journalists believe that "we often hear more about female editors simply because such information sounds important and "modern." As a result, we form the impression that many women hold decision-making roles in the media, when in reality, the situation is quite different. The system is literally built against us."

Female journalists continue to be subject to gender-based pressures. The pressures are numerous and are a consequence of the specific social context and attitudes towards women. As a form of harassment, they are present both in the newsroom itself and by persons who monitor the work of female journalists who, after attacks or primary threats, are further exposed to gender-based violence, sexist and misogynistic statements. Harassment from the work sphere is reflected in their daily lives, affecting the quality of sleep, everyday relationships and motivation for further work. A large number of female journalists most often resort to self-censorship (47%), followed by the possibility of leaving the profession (around 35%).

We classify various forms of discrimination as pressures, both those related to appearance and age. Research has shown that the respondents' attitude is that appearance has an impact on a career in the media, and in 26.5 percent of cases, the respondents stated that they were discriminated against during their careers because of their appearance. Many female journalists are discriminated against because of their age. A worrying fact is that almost a third of female journalists have experienced sexual harassment while doing their job. In addition to verbal harassment related to journalism, they are also exposed to insults based on their various characteristics.<sup>119</sup>

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119 Milica Mihajlović, [The first podcast about local media in Serbia: "Voice of the Local" enters the podcast scene](#), Voice of the Local, 18.12.2024

## C. JOURNALISTS' SAFETY

### — C.1 JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA ACTORS HAVE ACCESS TO IMMEDIATE AND EFFECTIVE PROTECTIVE MEASURES

Public prosecutor's office and the Ministry of the Interior, with the support and initiative of journalist associations, have established a mechanism for reporting serious threats, allowing journalists relatively easy access to the system. This mechanism includes instructions that oblige prosecutors and the police to act urgently within short deadlines, as well as contact points for rapid reporting and verification of cases.<sup>120</sup> Journalists who are exposed to threats and attacks can also contact the Standing working group for safety, which coordinates the work of the contact points.<sup>121</sup>

Although the system is functional and facilitates reporting, practice shows that its effectiveness varies. In smaller communities, especially in regional police departments and prosecutors' offices where such cases are less common, journalists often do not have equal access to protection. The main reasons for this are the lack of experience of the competent authorities with attacks on journalists and a lack of sensitivity towards their role. Although contact points in prosecutors' offices, the Ministry of the Interior and journalists' associations assist in the process, it happens that police officers and prosecutors are not aware of their role in the system, do not record cases as attacks on journalists or make procedural errors. In some cases, journalists in smaller communities continue to be deterred from reporting.

The long-term application of this mechanism has also led to negative practices, and due to the lack of adequate institutional support in cases of digital violence, journalists have developed their own self-protection strategies.<sup>122</sup>

According to data published within the framework of the work of the Standing working group for the safety of journalists, which is based on information from the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office, 44 cases were filed in Serbia in 2024 regarding threats and attacks on journalists. Of these, 17 cases relate to male journalists (43.18%), and 25 to female journalists (56.82%).<sup>123</sup> It is particularly concerning that female journalists are targeted more frequently, with threats against them often being more brutal and including explicit references to sexual violence.

The Journalists' Association of Serbia (JAS) recorded a total of 111 cases of threats against journalists and media workers in 2024, including 33 threats, 26 cases of work being prevented, 13 assaults, 29 pressures and insults, and 4 attacks on property.<sup>124</sup> The Independent Journalists'

120 SPPO, [Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office, Safety of Journalists](#), 2024

121 ANEM Safe Journalists, [Standing working group](#), 2024

122 Aleksandra Krstić Nikola Jović, Research, [How journalists in Serbia fight online attacks – normalization of digital violence as a consequence of lack of institutional support](#), Faculty of Political Science, October 2023

123 SPPO, [Statistical data on the actions of public prosecutors' offices in 2024](#), January 2025

124 JAS's database: [In 2024, 111 cases of threats, pressure and attacks on journalists and media workers were recorded](#), JAS, 2024

Association of Serbia (IJAS) recorded 117 assaults on journalists, an increase compared to the previous year, as well as an increase in the number of verbal threats from 47 to 68.<sup>125</sup> 49 journalists reported cases of threats of attack to the IJAS. Journalists often refuse to report cases to the competent authorities, but do so through journalistic associations. The MFRR monitoring report for 2024 documented 83 cases of violations of media freedom in Serbia, including verbal attacks, death threats, and assaults.<sup>126</sup>

The journalistic section of the Standing working group for the safety of journalists, the Media Coalition and associations have repeatedly expressed concern about the efficiency of investigations and the reaction of the authorities, given the large number of cases in which the prosecutor's office has still not received responses from the police to requests for information. The statistics of the decline in the number of reported threats and attacks, the decline in the number of unknown perpetrators of criminal offences against journalists and the increase in the number of resolved cases (which result in an increased number of dismissals through decisions and official notes by public prosecutors) give an inaccurate image of the improvement in the safety status of journalists in Serbia.

The Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office of Serbia informs the Standing working group for the safety of Journalists four times a year about the outcome of charges filed regarding incidents against journalists. In 2024, further action was dismissed in 14 cases. In 3 cases, a decision was made to dismiss the criminal charges, and in 11 cases, an official note was made that there was no reason to initiate criminal proceedings.

However, there are also charges that public prosecutors and the police accept, but very quickly reject them, without checking all the circumstances of the cases. Although there is no detailed data on specific cases and the reasons for the refusal to process journalists' reports by institutions, a large number of cases remain unresolved or take an extremely long time to process them. In almost every case of police violence against journalists and media workers, the Ministry of the Interior failed to act *ex officio* to verify the incidents, nor did it act on the reports filed.

For example, in November 2024, during a protest in Novi Sad, at least ten journalists were attacked, but information on the outcome of these cases is neither detailed nor available.<sup>127</sup> The most blatant example is the refusal of the Ministry of the Interior to act in cases of proven surveillance of journalists Slaviša Milanov and Ljubomir Stefanović, whose mobile devices were temporarily confiscated following abuses of police procedures, during which surveillance tools were either installed or attempted to be installed to monitor their communications. The police, at the request of Milanov and his lawyers, did not

125 IJAS, [Attack and pressure database](#), January 2025

126 Media Freedom Rapid Response, [MFRR attack database](#), Serbia, 2024

127 SafeJournalists Network, [Safejournalists network, recorded attacks on journalists on 17 December 2024](#), SJ, 2024

conduct a thorough investigation at all, nor did they properly conduct an internal review of the submitted request.<sup>128</sup>

## — C.2 JOURNALISTS AND OTHER MEDIA ACTORS (WHOSE LIVES OR PHYSICAL INTEGRITY ARE AT REAL AND IMMEDIATE RISK) HAVE ACCESS TO SPECIAL PROTECTION OR SAFETY MECHANISMS

In Serbia, there are several mechanisms for the protection of journalists facing threats or who are at risk, especially those investigating corruption and organized crime. However, these mechanisms mainly focus on legal protection and rapid institutional response, while the capacity to provide direct physical protection to individuals remains limited.

A Standing working group for the safety of journalists was established as a result of the Cooperation agreement between the Republic Public Prosecutor's Office, the Ministry of the Interior and journalists' associations.<sup>129</sup> This group aims to improve communication and coordination between competent institutions and media organizations, as well as to monitor cases of threats to the safety of journalists. As part of this agreement, a system of contact points has been established in journalist associations, prosecutors' offices and police departments across Serbia, which journalists can contact in case of threats or attacks. These contact points enable rapid response and urgent action by the competent authorities. In addition, the Serbian Criminal Code provides some protection for journalists, defining criminal offences related to threats to their safety. Amendments to the Criminal Code are considering extending protection to the property of journalists and their family members in connection with the practice of the journalistic profession.

While these mechanisms are a step forward in protecting journalists, direct physical protection, such as the assignment of personal security guards, is rarely provided and usually in exceptional situations when the risk to the life or physical integrity of the journalist is assessed to be high. Such measures require individual assessment by the competent authorities and are not systematically regulated for all journalists covering sensitive topics such as corruption and organized crime.

Although the focus of the Standing working group is on legal protection and efficient processing of cases of threats to the safety of journalists, there is no clear evidence of the existence of a formalized systematic risk assessment procedure that would identify the specific protection needs of journalists or other citizens who are victims. In practice, safety assessments are conducted individually by competent authorities, such as the Ministry of the Interior, in cases where journalists report threats or attacks. For example, in the case of threats to journalists Milan Nikić and Marko Vidojković, the Ministry of the Interior conducted an assessment of their security.<sup>130</sup>

128 Beta/N1, [The Ministry of Interior has not solved the case of spying on journalists from Dimitrovgrad even after a year](#), N1 Info, 25.03.2025

129 Standing Working Group, Report on the work of the Standing working group on the safety of journalists for 2024, OSCE Mission in Serbia, 02.05.2025.

130 Una Grekulović, [The International Press Institute provided support to Marko Vidojković](#), Cenzolovka, 06.09.2024

These examples indicate that, although there is no standardized systematic risk assessment procedure at the national level, competent authorities can conduct individual safety assessments in specific cases of reported threats or attacks on journalists. Improving these mechanisms through a formalized procedure could contribute to better protection of journalists and other citizens facing similar threats. On the other hand, numerous journalists and media workers refuse to have a special safety assessment carried out on them, and the reason for this is a serious distrust of the competent authorities, the Police and the Security Information Agency.

In Serbia, various types of assistance and support services are available for victims of crime, including journalists who face threats or attacks. These services are provided by state institutions and civil society organizations, with the aim of providing timely and adequate support to victims.

State institutions have support services for victims and witnesses of crime. However, there are no adequate reports on the results of the work of these services. The Ministry of the Interior has committed itself to implementing a special rulebook on assistance to the injured parties, but this internal document is rarely implemented. The Journalists' Helpline provides free legal assistance to journalists who are exposed to threats, attacks or pressure, covering the costs of lawyers representing attacked journalists. Support is provided by Safe Journalists, IJAS and IJAV.<sup>131</sup>

Although psychological support is recognized as important for journalists facing stress and trauma, such services are limited. Journalists often do not have access to adequate psychological assistance, which indicates the need to develop specialized support programmes in this area. However, these types of support exist, and IJAS and ANEM are at the forefront of this.

Despite the existence of these services, challenges remain in terms of their availability, coordination, and sustainability. Many organizations depend on project funds, which can affect the continuity of assistance provision.

### — C.3 FEMALE JOURNALISTS HAVE ACCESS TO LEGAL MEASURES AND SUPPORT MECHANISMS WHEN FACED WITH GENDER-BASED THREATS, HARASSMENT OR VIOLENCE

The Republic of Serbia has ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the Istanbul Convention. Serbia has thus committed to aligning its legislation with the standards of the Convention, which has resulted in the adoption and amendments of several laws and strategic documents aimed at preventing and combating gender-based violence. Preventive measures envisaged by Serbian legislation include education and awareness-raising, the

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131 IJAS; [First Line](#), 2024



implementation of educational programmes and campaigns to raise awareness about gender equality and the harmfulness of violence against women, and continuous professional development of employees in education, healthcare, police and the judiciary to recognise and adequately respond to cases of gender-based violence. However, in practice, this role is performed only by non-governmental organisations. Unfortunately, the systemic changes have not offered additional protection to women journalists themselves.

As preventive measures in the Criminal Code the criminal offences of persecution, sexual harassment, forced marriage and female genital mutilation are stipulated. Since the process of amending the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code began in 2023, proposals for special legislation addressing the position of female journalists as a vulnerable group—specifically because of their gender—will be submitted to the working groups in the near future. The Law on Free Legal Aid recognizes women as victims of domestic violence and beneficiaries of free legal aid, who are allowed this type of assistance outside the legally prescribed property census. The circle of beneficiaries of free legal aid is very narrow, and the methodology applied may exclude a large number of women journalists given their official income. The Law stipulates that only women with incomes below the minimum threshold are entitled to free legal aid; therefore, female journalists are unlikely to qualify as beneficiaries of this assistance. Institutions relevant to issues of violence against women have not established regular services to provide information on safety measures and legal support to female journalists, and they still do not have special persons who communicate with vulnerable female journalists.

The Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office recorded 59 cases, while female journalists appeared in 25 reports, or 56.8% of cases. Female journalists continue to most often report to journalist associations, primarily to their colleagues in the informal group Women Journalists Against Violence, to IJAS and ANEM through the Safe Journalists hotline. Unfortunately, the number of cases reported by female journalists is decreasing due to distrust and dissatisfaction with the work of the competent authorities.

Women journalists in Serbia who have been victims of harassment, threats or attacks often turn to competent institutions for advice, legal assistance and protection. However, the institutions' responses to their requests vary and are often unsatisfactory, which affects their future reporting or withdrawal. Repetition of such situations discourages reporting threats, and as many as 45 percent of journalists do not report threats.<sup>132</sup>

Many female journalists, especially at the local level, do not report threats and pressure due to a lack of trust in institutions

132 Aleksandra Krstić and Nikola Jović, research, [How journalists in Serbia fight online attacks – the normalization of digital violence as a consequence of the lack of institutional support](#), FPS/IJAS, 2024

and doubts that they will be adequately protected. There are examples where institutions have acted ineffectively or have rejected reports from female journalists.<sup>133</sup> Although mechanisms for reporting threats and attacks are available, many female journalists express dissatisfaction with the efficiency of institutions in resolving these cases. Frequent impunity leads to distrust in institutions and a reluctance to report, as well as the emergence of self-censorship. For example, journalist Ana Lalić Hegediš received a death threat via a social network, and although the case was reported to the Special Prosecutor's Office for Cybercrime, the outcomes of such reports often remain uncertain. A temporary measure of house arrest was imposed in only one case, but the individual managed to violate it and flee. There is almost no accountability among officials for such failures. Institutions act selectively and the outcomes remain uncertain, so it is not clear what the action depends on, as it is often not in accordance with regulations.

#### — C.4 PRACTICE OF REGULAR PUBLIC CONDEMNATION OF THREATS AND ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED

Institutions have not established a practice of publicly condemning threats of attacks on journalists. On the contrary, government representatives not only do not condemn attacks on independent and critically oriented journalists, but in fact, with their negative public narrative, they incite such attacks or often initiate such attacks themselves. Although there are some examples of public condemnation of threats and attacks on journalists by state institutions and political parties, such reactions are not consistent and do not represent established practice.

State institutions and political parties publicly condemn only threats or attacks on specific media outlets and journalists. For example, in November 2024, the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications strongly condemned the attack on journalists during a protest by opposition MPs and members of provincial assembly with citizens in Belgrade and Novi Sad, demanding a quick reaction from the competent authorities. They only issue condemnations in strategically important cases, when the political leadership considers it important to publicly condemn them, and this is usually the case when tabloid and pro-government journalists are attacked or threatened. Although the Minister of Justice Maja Popović stated in June 2024 that the state would not tolerate violence against journalists and that the competent authorities would react quickly, numerous reports indicate selective action by institutions.

Public officials, political leaders and politicians in Serbia very rarely issue clear and explicit condemnations of attacks on journalists, especially when it comes to independent media.

<sup>133</sup> Journalist Gorica Nikolin from Novi Sad reported threats she received after reporting on illegal activities at a school. The Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad dismissed her charges, despite the evidence provided, such as recordings of phone conversations and correspondence. Dozens of threats to Ksenija Pavkov in Telegram groups and in received messages were dismissed due to a lack of evidence that criminal acts had been committed.

There is a clear tendency to react more quickly when pro-government media are affected, while independent media are often left without adequate support or protection. The Speaker of the Assembly and the President of Serbia react almost immediately and come to the defence of pro-government tabloid journalists, even without checking whether the attacks actually occurred. This bias has contributed to a hostile environment for journalists who report critically on the government. In 2024, it is notable that the authorities reacted quickly to threats against journalists from pro-government media, such as the Tanjug news agency, where an urgent investigation was launched after death threats. However, in cases of attacks on independent media, such as N1 TV, the police often did not intervene or there was no official reaction, which indicates discrimination. For example, in November 2024, masked protesters attacked journalists from TV N1 and Euronews, while the police just watched silently.

Government representatives and public officials create an inflammatory atmosphere with their statements and create a terrain for attacks on independent and investigative journalists. Negative qualifications first come from public officials, and then such messages are multiplied and shared through tabloids or on fake profiles on social networks. These are orchestrated campaigns, the aim of which is to intimidate journalists. Such repeated smear campaigns encourage and legitimize the intimidation of journalists. Politicians and tabloids use the same vocabulary and narrative when attacking the media. Public officials play a key role in creating a hostile environment for journalists, especially through direct threats and institutional pressures. According to the 2024 Council of Europe Report, 13.1% of threats to journalists come from public officials, while 46.2% of journalists often or regularly encounter institutional pressures, including denial of access to media events and abuse of power.<sup>134</sup> These pressures often include verbal threats (30.5%) and campaigns to discredit (29.9%), which further endanger the safety of journalists. Pro-government media play a significant role in creating a hostile environment, often under the direct or indirect influence of public officials.

#### — C.5 POLICE AUTHORITIES ARE SENSITIVE TO JOURNALISTS' PROTECTION ISSUE

Police officers are not adequately trained to provide basic human rights protection and recognize the role of journalists in a democratic society. Police officers in Serbia are probably not sufficiently educated and familiar with basic international human rights standards and the role of journalists in a democratic society to be able to protect them.

Police officers are still not sensitive enough and do not understand the role of journalists. They are under enormous pressure from superiors who are influenced by representatives of the executive branch and are often instructed to take action against journalists. An additional problem is the frequent

134 Council of Europe [Report on threats to journalists, Serbia](#), 15.03.2024

changes of contact points in police regional administrations, so there is no continuity of work when it comes to these persons.

The police are paying less and less attention to the threats and attacks faced by journalists. In fewer and fewer cases do they respond appropriately, and basic support for injured journalists is also lacking. Communication with contact points and representatives is very good, but certain instances indicate that this cooperation is in a way imposed and accepted. Responses are selective in nature, varying from case to case and depending on the source of the threat or attack.

Since 2019, the Ministry of the Interior has been implementing a special rulebook in its work that provides for an immediate response when it comes to attacks on journalists and media workers, as well as contact points in its administrations. However, the lack of publicly available detailed documents and reports of police misconduct indicate serious shortcomings in implementation.

The police did not pay due attention to the safety of journalists in 2024, despite some initiatives and information within the Standing working group for the safety of journalists and the public. The conduct of police officers is often marked by violence, disregard for journalists wearing press badges, occasional assaults, wiretapping, and a refusal to take responsibility for their actions. In the previous year, there were several cases of unfounded detention of journalists by the police, and a significant example is the detention of Slaviša Milanov in February 2024. An Amnesty International report, published in December 2024, describes in detail how Milanov, an independent journalist, was detained on suspicion of driving under the influence of alcohol, but a subsequent forensic analysis revealed that his phone was unlocked, indicating that the detention was a pretext for surveillance (Amnesty International Report). The case attracted significant public attention and was described as "unnecessary harassment" aimed at intimidation and reinforcing baseless claims. The police refused to accept responsibility for the charges. Ljubomir Stefanović, founder of the YouTube channel Slavija Info, was also detained and held for several hours, with detailed questioning, which later turned out to be aimed at downloading data and installing tracking tools on his mobile device. Such actions have seriously damaged the relationship between journalists and the police.

Police representatives generally show a positive attitude towards cooperation with journalist associations, however, actual events and the situation with attacks and monitoring of journalists have shown that this relationship is superficial and without any real intention to improve media safety. General communication is at a very good level, if the verification system is used through the representatives of the Ministry of the Interior in the Standing working group and police contact points in regional administrations. Verifications are carried out urgently, with quick responses, however often incomplete or indefinite. The reason for this is formal police procedures and the lack of information, access approvals or

time for collection. On the other hand, official communication is the same as that which citizens have with the police, so inquiries and answers are waited for or such communication is ignored. In 2024, the relationship between the Serbian police authorities and journalist associations was complex, marked by both joint initiatives and significant challenges. However, this cooperation was hampered and slowed down by incidents in which journalists were exposed to attacks during protests.

#### — C.6 SPECIALISED UNITS/OFFICERS ARE EQUIPPED WITH EXPERTISE FOR INVESTIGATING ATTACKS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST JOURNALISTS

Public prosecutors' offices and the police, based on the signed agreement on mutual cooperation and in accordance with the adopted internal regulations, have appointed public prosecutors and police officers at different levels as special contact points for cases of attacks on journalists since 2018. These contact points were established with the aim of responding to incidents more efficiently, coordinating between institutions and monitoring proceedings until their completion.<sup>135</sup> The main task of the contact points is to monitor the progress of cases, coordinate the work between the police and the prosecutor's office, report new incidents and check the status of previously reported cases. Although they are not part of specialized teams, the contact points are obliged to deal with all incidents against journalists. According to the binding instruction, each public prosecutor's office in Serbia has a contact point that monitors cases of attacks on journalists, which includes 130 public prosecutors and their deputies. There are over 100 police officers in the regional police departments who are appointed as contact persons for such cases. However, due to various administrative and staffing reasons, these contact points are frequently changed—almost annually—which disrupts operational continuity and weakens institutional memory regarding previous cases. The police have better technical resources for collecting evidence, including digital forensics and video surveillance analysis, while prosecutors have the capacity for legal processing and prosecuting cases. Despite the formal division of responsibilities, problems still exist. Contact points perform this work as an additional activity, in addition to regular duties, which leads to different levels of commitment and quality of treatment. In practice, public prosecutors often show greater commitment than police officers, which may be a consequence of different priorities and obligations within their institutions. Also, serious problems have been observed in the sensitivity of the police towards journalists, where it often happens that reports are not processed in a timely manner or that there is no adequate response to threats to their safety. Sensitivity is directly related to the observed attacks in public by party representatives in public discourse. The lack of operational independence of the police in their work also greatly affects their attitude towards journalists.

135 Supreme Public Procurement Office, [Agreement on cooperation between the then-Republic Public Prosecutor's Offices, Ministry of the Interior and journalist associations](#), January 2025



Although prosecutors and police officers have a good understanding of the offences and crimes committed against journalists, there is a lack of sufficient understanding of the gravity of the journalistic work and the real threats that journalists experience to consider each individual case in more detail. The problem is the way in which certain cases are approached, which are easily dismissed due to the absence of direct threats. What is better are the decisions of certain public prosecutors, which represent a counteraction to certain discretionary orders of higher levels of prosecutorial offices that were contrary to the law.

There is mandatory cooperation between the police and public prosecutors at all levels, as prescribed by law. It is based on an agreement on joint action in collecting information and is the main mechanism for securing evidence that public prosecutors use in building cases. However, despite participation in working groups for the safety of journalists, numerous communication problems persist, leading to failures in data collection, slow action and delays in investigations. The police often fail to act on prosecutors' orders. Public prosecutors do not react to delays and failures and do not use all the measures at their disposal against possible abuses by the police. The police are also currently unable to effectively resolve cases of abuse of authority by their officers, and numerous incidents of assault by police officers remain unprocessed due to delays in internal control procedures. The situation is further aggravated by cases of unlawful detention and surveillance of journalists, which the police refuse to acknowledge. Dozens of journalists have been targeted by attacks using devices such as Cellebrite and Pegasus, raising additional concerns about the safety and privacy of media workers.

— **C.7 INVESTIGATIONS OF SERIOUS PHYSICAL  
ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS AND OTHER MEDIA  
ACTORS ARE CARRIED OUT EFFICIENTLY  
(INDEPENDENTLY, THOROUGHLY AND PROMPTLY)**

Investigations are generally independent of those they concern, but in strategically very important cases the line between interference by representatives of the executive branch and at least the apparent independence of the acting prosecutors disappears. In 2024, there were still concerns about the independence and comprehensiveness of investigations conducted by Serbian prosecutors and the police, especially in cases involving attacks on journalists. Representatives of the executive branch continue to interfere in the work of public prosecutors, and the actions of certain prosecutors clearly indicate the protection of those in power. Investigations are often not comprehensive, whereas the sources of incidents and the causes of individual attacks are put in the background. In addition, in November 2024, during protests in Novi Sad after the tragic collapse of the railway station canopy, N1 and Euronews journalists were attacked while reporting. Despite a significant police presence, officers reportedly failed to intervene to prevent violence or arrest perpetrators, leading to condemnation from journalist associations and calls for accountability. While mechanisms

such as the Standing working group on the safety of journalists exist to address such issues, their effectiveness has been called into question by a broader climate of political influence and hostility towards independent media.

The receipt and recording of reports is carried out very quickly, but further investigations are problematic. Most serious reports are given high priority in urgent processing, except in cases where the authorities consider that an urgent response is not necessary. Unfortunately, journalists and the authorities do not agree on which cases are more priority than others, given the subjective feeling of fear and the real consequences of the threats. In 2024, the response of the Serbian police and prosecutors to crimes against journalists varied, with examples of both quick action and delays. Journalists reported numerous delays and suspicions of irregularities in the investigations. In the case of Vuk Cvijić, the investigation lasted almost 10 months, and after procrastination and malicious failure to provide evidence, the prosecutor's office dismissed the report in a very short time under extremely unclear circumstances and with vague explanations. N1 correspondent Milan Stojanović pointed out that after reporting two attacks, the prosecutor initially dismissed both cases. Only after the intervention of the Higher Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade were the cases reopened. The cases reflect the complex situation in Serbia regarding the priorities and effectiveness of investigations into attacks and threats against journalists.

Procedural deadlines in criminal proceedings are often not respected, which negatively affects investigations and the course of cases. Compliance with deadlines for initiating proceedings and conducting investigations varies, and the formal deadline for receiving, filing cases and taking first action is 48 hours. However, in practice, a large number of prosecutors do not respond within the legal deadlines, which leads to delays in the processing of criminal offences.

The further course of the investigation depends on the complexity of the case, the collection of information and the provision of evidence. In cases where the threats are direct, the perpetrators are known and have no previous convictions, investigations are usually completed more quickly, with mechanisms such as opportunity or plea agreements often being applied. On the other hand, more complex cases, especially those involving organised attacks on journalists or a broader context of threats, encounter long delays and often remain without a final epilogue. The pressure on public prosecutors' offices is increasing, and it is evident that some, such as the Special Prosecutor's Office for Cybercrime, have tens of thousands of cases. The largest number of threats of attacks on journalists and the media comes from social networks.

In almost all investigations, deadlines for action are being missed, and the efficiency of the work of the prosecution and the police depends on factors that are not exclusively legal in nature. There is a significant political influence on the course of investigations, which further complicates the

processing of attacks on journalists. These incidents are often not adequately qualified. One of the reasons is the reduction in the capacity of public prosecutors' offices that are capable of resolving cases of attacks on journalists. The work of the Special Prosecutor's Office for Cybercrime is seriously jeopardized by constant changes in the annual schedule of public prosecutors. Public prosecutors from the Special Prosecutor's Office for Cybercrime who have undergone numerous trainings have been transferred to the general department, and public prosecutors who do not have special knowledge have been assigned to replace them. The constant fluctuation of public prosecutors, in a situation where there are not enough of them, leads to a standstill in work.

#### — C.8 JOURNALISTS AND OTHER MEDIA ACTORS ARE EFFICIENTLY PROTECTED FROM VARIOUS FORMS OF ONLINE HARASSMENT

The Criminal Code (CC) stipulates criminal offences related to threats or attacks on social networks, or the internet in general. For journalists, the most important and significant is the threat to safety under Article 138. This offence has a special paragraph 3 that recognises attacks on a person performing work of public interest in the field of public information, which in practice is most often recognised as journalistic work, and an additional special criminal offence, stalking under Article 138a, which very often occurs on social networks, is also of importance.

In relation to social networks, computer sabotage is also important, when it refers to a person who performs tasks of public importance in the field of information in connection with the work they perform (Article 299 of the Criminal Code); unauthorized access to a protected computer, computer network and electronic data processing when it refers to a person who performs tasks of public importance in the field of information in connection with the work they perform (Article 302 of the Criminal Code); racial and other discrimination (Article 387 of the Criminal Code, paragraphs 4 and 6 in connection with paragraph 1); Article 146 regarding unauthorized collection of personal data, when it refers to a person who performs tasks of public importance in the field of information in connection with the work they perform. These offences may be very relevant to cases of harassment of journalists via social networks, which is a very common case in practice.

The journalistic community highlights the importance of prosecuting certain crimes that are currently being neglected, which could be crucial in combating so-called organized smear campaigns. These campaigns often result in serious threats sent online, including incitement to commit criminal offences, as regulated by Article 34 of the Criminal Code. Despite their potentially harmful impact, such cases are rarely adequately investigated and sanctioned, further contributing to the climate of impunity.

The draft criminal law regulations have provoked heated reactions from the professional public, who have assessed

the proposed amendments as populist.<sup>136</sup> Representatives of non-governmental organizations and legal experts believe that mass electronic monitoring of citizens is being introduced through a back door and that fear of arrest is being sown if someone merely posts a call for protest on social networks. Extortion of statements, toughening of penalties, publication of materials advising the commission of a criminal offence are problematic provisions that could easily apply to journalists in real life.<sup>137</sup> Certain provisions carry the risk of mass surveillance of citizens, and numerous amendments to this criminal matter lead to discretionary interpretations of the provisions.<sup>138</sup>

Journalist associations and media organizations have submitted comments and proposals for amendments to the above laws, despite the fact that they assessed the deadline for public consultation as unreasonably short. Representatives of journalist associations and media associations in the Standing working group for the safety of journalists, in addition to individual proposals, have also submitted joint proposals for amendments to the Criminal Code, through the Media Coalition or joint proposals of individual associations. The proposals were drafted based on the legal opinions of three experts in the field of criminal legislation, with the aim of drafting a proposal that would improve the safety of media workers.<sup>139</sup> The proposals related to the improvement of specific offences that most often affect journalists, such as the criminal offence of light bodily injury committed against a media worker, for which criminal prosecution would be undertaken *ex officio*, or the criminal offence of coercion, which, according to the experts, should be amended to include media workers. In this way, stricter punishment would be achieved for those who commit a criminal offence to the detriment of journalists. Amendments to the criminal offence of endangering safety were also proposed. Most of the proposals were not adopted after a short public consultation, and the Ministry of Justice announced that the public consultation on the proposed amendments would last throughout 2025.<sup>140</sup>

Journalists reported a wide range of online harassment, including death threats, threats of physical violence, insults, defamation, trolling, cyberbullying, impersonation and sexual harassment or threats. Hacking attacks on private accounts that others attempted to take over, as well as attacks on websites, were also reported. These incidents, which are often part of coordinated campaigns, highlight the hostile digital environment and the need for increased protection to ensure or at least partially ensure media freedom. Digital violence was experienced by 39.2% of journalists, with specific types including trolling, disruptive behaviour and online targeting aimed at provoking or harassing, often through inflammatory comments; cyberbullying that was repeated; targeted online

136 Cepris, [Savović: Toughening criminal penalties is a pure populist act](#), April 2025

137 Istinomer Team, [What do we know so far about the amendments to the Criminal Code?](#), Istinomer, 28.10.2024

138 Yucom, [Komlen Nikolić on the Criminal Code: The greatest danger is mass surveillance of citizens](#), 21.10.2024

139 Opinion of legal experts engaged by the Standing working group on safety: Zoran Stojanović, former professor of Criminal Law at the Faculty of Law, University of Belgrade, Igor Vuković, full professor of Criminal Law at the Faculty of Law, University of Belgrade, and Slobodan Beljanski, lawyer

140 Leposava Čolić, [About the Criminal Code in 2025 as well](#), Fonet, 29.11.2024

attacks, such as abusive messages or posts intended to intimidate; impersonation, which most often included the creation of fake profiles or accounts to impersonate journalists, and damage to their reputation. The most significant case is an attempt to install a communication monitoring tool on BIRN women journalists via chat applications and the internet.

The competent authorities do not foresee or take any special measures, but the main focus is on the rapid conclusion of cases, initiation and verification of cases that would indicate the commission of criminal offences. Apart from direct action in cases of harassment and threats on the Internet, analyses have been made and solutions proposed within the framework of planned amendments to the Criminal Code, with the aim of strengthening protection on the Internet, however, further discussion and adoption have been postponed. The practice of applying criminal offences in reality is not encouraging, so potential solutions are proposed for the so-called "borderline" cases and their resolution. Experts and lawyers are divided in their views. While some journalist associations believe that amendments to the Criminal Code are necessary, another part of journalist associations and human rights organizations believe that solutions should be sought in changing practice. During visits to cities in Serbia, the Standing working group on safety continued discussions with journalists and media representatives on the problems of threats and violence on the Internet.

#### **— C.9 INVESTIGATIONS OF ALL TYPES OF ATTACKS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST JOURNALISTS AND OTHER MEDIA ACTORS ARE CARRIED OUT TRANSPARENTLY**

Injured journalists in Serbia have not had effective access to the investigative process. In a large number of cases, journalists have not received adequate information about the investigation, have had limited access to case files and have faced challenges in presenting evidence, as evidenced by the lack of detailed participation of victims in reported cases and the overall inefficiency of the judiciary highlighted in reports on media freedom. Access to information about the case and the evidence presented is limited by the Criminal Procedure Code and prosecutorial investigation. Prosecutors insist on access through official channels, such as access to the case by injured parties, but information in a less detailed form and notifications about the proceedings can also be accessed through contact points from journalist associations. Journalists as injured parties have faced difficulties in accessing the investigative process itself, including receiving new or updated information about investigations and accessing data from the cases themselves. Although criminal law regulations provide certain rights such as information on prosecutorial decisions, practical implementation is limited, especially given the impunity of attacks on journalists. One of the problems cited is the frequent failure to inform about the outcome of proceedings and information about compensation claims, which can put injured journalists in an unenviable position. Injured journalists have had limited opportunities to present evidence during investigations, due to the frequent lack of transparency from



the police and public prosecutors in particularly sensitive cases. These problems are even more severe in cases in local areas.

In 2024, the press services of courts and prosecutors' offices in Serbia were not always responsive and did not always provide completely truthful information on the status of proceedings, especially for past crimes such as war crimes, corruption and attacks on journalists. The transparency of the process was limited by delays, lack of public data and institutional weaknesses. Political pressures, including comments by officials and transfers of prosecutors, together with societal pressures such as the glorification of attackers, perpetrators and persons threatening journalists, significantly affected the work of the judiciary and the ability of press services to communicate effectively. The OSCE Mission to Serbia, in partnership with the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia, launched an initiative aimed at promoting responsible reporting on legal issues, especially during court proceedings. It was noted that journalists sometimes do not understand court procedures and procedural rules, which often leads them to criticize courts when they are actually acting in a normal manner, in accordance with the law. Although there are initiatives such as working meetings between spokespersons, prosecutors, judges and journalists, as well as ideas about forming working groups, they have not led to significant improvements in public information by the end of 2024.

## — C.10 QUALITY STATISTICS COLLECTION SYSTEMS ESTABLISHED BY STATE AUTHORITIES TO STEM IMPUNITY

The Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office (SPPO) and the Ministry of the Interior (Mol) have been keeping records since 2016, although the scope and quality of the information they collect and share differ. Since December 2023, monthly updated records kept by the SPPO have been submitted to representatives of the Standing working group for safety. During 2024, based on submitted criminal charges/reports, 62 cases were established in public prosecutor's offices in connection with events to the detriment of 65 injured parties, i.e. 49 individual persons performing tasks of public importance in the field of information, of which 22 injured parties were male (44.9%) and 27 were female (55.1%).<sup>141</sup> Due to certain standards and rules in the application of public prosecutor's offices, which are often unclear, it happens that

141 Of the total number of cases, 42 cases were filed in the Special Public Prosecutor's Office for Cybercrime, which represents 67.74% of the total number of cases. These cases were filed in connection with events to the detriment of 40 injured parties, or 28 individual persons performing tasks of public importance in the field of information, of which 9 injured parties were male (32.14%), and 19 were female (67.86%).

In the filed cases, up to 31.12.2024, the following actions were taken:

- in 1 case, a conviction was rendered;
- in 1 case, the perpetrator was sanctioned by imposing an obligation prescribed by the Criminal Procedure Code regarding deferred criminal prosecution (opportunity), and the obligations were fully fulfilled;
- in 1 case, the court rejected the proposal for imposing a security measure of mandatory psychiatric treatment and suspended the criminal proceedings;
- in 3 cases, a decision was made to dismiss the criminal charges;
- in 11 cases, an official note was made that there is no reason to initiate criminal proceedings;
- in 3 cases, court proceedings are underway based on the indictment of the public prosecutor;
- in 3 cases, evidentiary actions are underway;
- in 34 cases, a request was submitted to collect the necessary information;
- in 5 cases, even after taking measures in the pre-investigation procedure, the potential perpetrator was not identified.

A first-instance or final decision was made in 17 cases, which represents 27.42% of the total number of cases.

certain cases are removed from the databases. The reasons for this are various (closed cases, offences that are not initially linked to attacks on journalists, lack of evidence indicating that it is an attack or threat against journalists because of the work they do). The Ministry of the Interior also maintains a specific database of incidents and reports filed when the injured party is a journalist, but this data is not public.

There is still a gap between the data available to public prosecutors and the associations' reports in databases on attacks on journalists. For example, while the IJAS recorded as many as 117 attacks, threats and other intimidation in 2024, state authorities have not confirmed this figure or provided their own number, which speaks to problems such as under-reporting, the treatment of reports by competent authorities or a lack of transparency in reported incidents.<sup>142</sup> The discrepancy between independent data and the lack of transparency of the state, combined with political pressures, indicate that the data recorded by the state may have been incomplete or selectively analysed.

The data maintained and submitted by the SPPO is the most extensive and is recorded according to the type of criminal offence, basic data of the injured party and the stages of the proceedings. SPPOs record only cases filed against journalists, not all received reports. This practically means that almost 20% of submitted reports and notifications remain unrecorded. IJAS has identified at least 20 cases that were reported or about which the police and prosecutor's office were informed, but which were not found in the SPPO database.

Cases are also not formed on the basis of official information, but only on the basis of the received report. The database contains personal data, the place of the attack, the date the case was filed, gender and the current stage of the procedure, i.e. the basic description of the actions taken by the public prosecutor and the police. The description is not an indicator of the real situation. Apart from gender, the entered cases are not classified according to ethnicity and other socio-demographic criteria. This data was provided to SWG members from associations until January 2025, however, due to the freezing of activities by the associations, this communication was temporarily interrupted.

Since the beginning of 2024, the data kept by the SPPO has also been processed and classified according to the gender of the injured journalists. Although the data is not classified according to other indicators, certain personal data is available to members of the Standing working group for safety, so it is possible to analyse other characteristics within the notification.

## — C.11 NON-PHYSICAL THREATS AND HARASSMENTS

In 2024, 23 cases of non-physical threats and harassment were registered.

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142 IJAS, [SafeJournalists attack](#) and threats database, 2024

The situation has worsened compared to previous years. It is particularly worrying that the number of such threats in practice is constantly increasing, and journalists avoid reporting them because they do not distinguish them from more serious forms of threats. Serbian criminal law practice does not consider indirect written or spoken threats, which can even be calls for murder, rape or physical attacks, to be punishable. Such cases are generally not prosecuted, so journalists avoid reporting them.

Although the cases were recorded in the category of actual attacks, given the primary incidents related to the apprehending and detention of journalists, the most significant cases of surveillance and monitoring were recorded in the cases of Slaviša Milanov from Dimitrovgrad and Ljubomir Stefanović from Belgrade. Milanov was initially stopped by the traffic police during an alleged regular check. After exhausting all means during the check, he was taken to the police station for additional questioning and testing for psychoactive substances. On that occasion, his mobile phone was confiscated, which was later, according to an expert report by Amnesty International, unlocked by police officers and software for monitoring communications was installed on it. The police and the SIA did not acknowledge these activities, nor did they conduct appropriate investigations due to suspicions of illegal access and misuse. The proceedings before the competent public prosecutor's office are still ongoing based on the report by Slaviša Milanov. Ljubomir Stefanović was intercepted on the street by SIA officers, forced into a vehicle with the use of physical force, and taken for informative talks that lasted five hours. During that time, they used unlocking tools on his phone, which was confiscated from him in the meantime, and very possibly installed software for monitoring communications. Stefanović filed criminal charges against unknown persons who illegally detained him and held him for questioning, as well as the use of tools on his mobile phone. There was also a case of a journalist from southwest Serbia who expressed suspicion that his communications were intercepted by representatives of state institutions.

Journalist Vanja Đurić was, among other things, harassed by phone because her phone number was published on the social network X with the message "here is the phone number of Vanja Đurić, who spat on our Pavlina, tell her what you think of her, she deleted the tweet". The journalist began to receive disturbing messages and calls, after which she had to change her phone number. On the other hand, for publishing the number of the Speaker of the Assembly on Twitter, Marko Marjanović was arrested several times and numerous measures were imposed on him. This is another in a series of examples of selective application of Article 138, paragraph 3 of the Criminal Code, which puts journalists and persons like the Speaker of the Assembly on the same level. This is also another example and argument that, if users of social networks are known, state authorities will react. Anonymous users of social networks or selective application of the law represent a major problem.

The President of Serbia and the Speaker of the National Assembly have repeatedly made a series of accusations in their statements against the owners of the United Media Group and journalists of the media owned by this group, such as accusations that they are organizing the assassination of the President of Serbia or organizing and preparing coups in Serbia. On several occasions during the year, pro-government tabloid media have fiercely attacked KRIK and its editor Stevan Dojčinović, primarily in connection with the collection of information and data related to the articles they publish. Their articles have been based on harsh statements by officials against investigative journalists. All of this has been done in organized campaigns against KRIK.

## — C.12 THREATS AGAINST THE LIVES AND PHYSICAL SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS

Eighty cases of serious threats against journalists and individuals within media newsrooms were recorded. These are very serious threats, which in most cases represent direct threats made on social media and in person, which are dangerous to the life and physical integrity of journalists and their family members. Unfortunately, most cases have remained unresolved. There have been threats of murder, physical attacks, rape and violence not only against journalists, but also against their children and other family members. There have been threats against entire editorial team, by setting bombs and mass murders.

The situation is much more difficult than last year and could be described as the most severe so far for journalists, given the ease with which threats are made, the number of incidents, and the lack of accountability from those responsible. Of particular concern is the severity and the ways in which the threats were made, and additional fear is caused by the support of government representatives who are often the initiators and instigators of such brutal statements. Individual cases are very serious because entire editorial team is threatened with bombs, attacks and murders, and threats made against female journalists are of particular concern, which in almost every case have an additional misogynistic character. Dinko Gruhonjić and Ana Lalić have experienced dozens of brutal threats of murder, rape, mutilation, persecution, expulsion and other physical attacks. In one case of a threat to Ana Lalić in March, the person who was detained for this reason and placed under house arrest removed the electronic monitoring device less than a month later and escaped house arrest. Serbian authorities do not have information about whether he is in the country, but it is assumed that the person has fled to France. Gordana Momčilović Ilić was standing next to her bicycle on the street when the car stopped, and the woman who got out told the journalist that she would kill her if she mentioned her brother again. The editorial staff and journalists of N1 have received direct death threats several times, most often via social networks and emails to editorial staff. They have been threatened with throwing bombs, murders, rape and attacks on their families and friends. Most of the threats were reported immediately and unfortunately are in the status of unknown or still unidentified

perpetrators. The editorial staff of the Radar newspaper has received 5 direct death threats in a short period of time. Sportklub journalists have been directly threatened with death by dissatisfied Red Star fans for reporting on basketball games.

Independent media outlets are also targeted by implicit threats. On several occasions, it is stated that they should be killed, physically attacked or expelled from Serbia. They are being labelled and written about that they are "Ustaše", collaborators of the occupiers and foreign, especially Western embassies. Nenad Kulačin and Marko Vidojković have received several implicit threats in which hate speech is used against them or it is stated that they should be attacked or expelled because they are traitors. Nenad Kulačin has been intercepted and threatened by the same person in Šabac, the city where he lives, on several occasions, however, the last time he approached him and almost physically attacked him, with threats.

### — C.13 ACTUAL ATTACKS

This year, 23 assaults were recorded, and each of them was reported to the police or public prosecutors' offices, or they were prosecuted *ex officio*. In most cases, these were assaults on journalists and their TV crews while reporting on certain events. Journalists were also attacked by police officers. They were attacked at polling stations and at anti-corruption protests organized in Belgrade and Novi Sad. Since November 2024, safety has deteriorated, and 11 assaults were recorded in that period. The situation is more difficult than in previous years, especially since it has been demonstrated that journalists are not safe at events and protests that are organized, especially journalists from critically oriented media. Journalist Jelena Mirković was physically attacked twice at the same event. First, the people who came to cause riots at the protest tried to snatch the microphone from her hand, hitting her, and then, in the stampede of protest participants, a masked person ran past her, intentionally hitting her in the arm, causing her to fall to the concrete and injure her neck. While Danas journalist Uglješa Bokić was filming and trying to conduct a survey among young people during the election day on 2 June in Novi Sad, after a blockade lasting several hours, a man in a cap grabbed his phone and punched him in the chest. Although the incident was recorded on a mobile phone, which clearly shows the intention and attack on the journalist, the suspect was acquitted. Journalist Miloš Ljiljanić was openly attacked by representatives of the ruling party in Kovin. The attacker, who is a member of the local assembly, first hit the journalist with his shoulder and pushed him away when he tried to take a statement from the Speaker of the Assembly, and then tried to snatch the mobile phone from his hand, twisting his arm. The Chief of Staff of the Mayor of Indija first did not allow journalist Verica Marinčić to attend an important session in the municipality, and then, on the order of the Chief of Staff, a security guard grabbed the journalist by the arm and very roughly pushed her out. The entire incident lasted several minutes, and the security guard behaved very roughly and violently towards the journalist.



During the civic protests near the Novi Sad Railway Station, a few days after the tragedy and the deaths of citizens due to the collapse of the station canopy, several reporting teams were attacked. Cameramen from N1 and Euronews were injured, and a crew from the radio and portal 021 were also attacked. An organized group of citizens came with the intention of causing incidents at the protest in front of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, during which one of the drivers who tried to break through the student and citizen blockade hit the arm of a [Nova.rs](#) journalist who was filming the event with all his strength, knocking her phone onto the concrete.

#### — C.14 THREATS AND ATTACKS ON MEDIA OUTLETS AND JOURNALISTS' ASSOCIATIONS

Four serious cases of threats and attacks on media outlets and associations were recorded. The situation is no different from previous periods, because independent media still receive hundreds of insults, pressures and other forms of deliberate and intentional targeting that are not considered as unlawful acts under criminal law practice. Most often, these are attempts to gather in front of independent television stations; in the context of threats against journalists themselves, outbursts of anger or conscious attempts to damage journalists' equipment or cars.

The media outlets N1, Nova S, Danas and the investigative portals KRIK, BIRN or 021 from Novi Sad almost do not report threats to the safety of the media outlets themselves, but focus more on individual threats made to their journalists and editorial teams. Threats to journalists are linked to the media outlets to which they belong and the trend in Serbia is that, when serious threats are made, they are made against journalists. In most cases, incidents are personified through journalists representing the media, so individuals or entire editorial team become the most common targets of brutal emails and messages in comments on social networks. TV N1 received the most threats sent directly to the media or editorial team, however, given that these are death threats and attacks on the journalists themselves, they are recorded as threats to editorial team or individual journalists who were mentioned.

The web portal Magločistač has been attacked several times by hackers, as has the In Medija portal from Inđija. The attacks are mostly related to the writing and local activities of independent portals. Due to a lack of financial resources and support, these portals are unable to resist attacks and often suffer damage.



# Conclusions and Recommendations

## CONCLUSIONS

### LEGAL SAFEGUARDS AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION

Freedom of expression is guaranteed, including the right to seek, receive and disseminate information and ideas. However, amendments that were supposed to strengthen media regulations in an inclusive process have been misused and new opportunities to improve the state of media freedom have been missed. The procedures for appointing members of the REM Council were neither democratic nor transparent, with numerous reports of manipulation by the ruling party. The Regulator faces frequent criticism for its lack of genuine independence and politically motivated decision-making. Amendments to the regulations have still not resolved the problem of the lack of full financial and institutional independence of public service broadcasters, as well as the adequate realization of the public interest in the context of the diversity of information content. Selected media are unjustifiably encouraged through direct financing, public procurement, co-financing projects and advertising contracts. Public funds intended for this is largely allocated to pro-regime media and phantom pro-regime organizations. Serbia operates within a system marked by ongoing abuses, discriminatory practices, and arbitrary application of other laws aimed at intimidating journalists. In 2024, journalists were detained in fabricated proceedings involving procedural abuses by police and security services, during which their mobile devices were confiscated. Current and important information about government officials, public office holders, major projects, or business dealings remains inaccessible, while journalists are punished through the filing of SLAPP lawsuits.

## JOURNALISTS' POSITION IN THE NEWSROOMS

The social and economic position of journalists and media workers remains extremely unfavourable, marked by insecure working conditions and limited labour rights. The position of young journalists, who are exposed to constant pressure due to part-time work and financial uncertainty, is of particular concern. Low salaries, non-compliance with working hours, unpaid overtime, uncertainty about the survival of the media, pressures from various sources and negative impact on mental health are the key problems they face. For a number of years, the government has been influencing editorial policy in various ways through state money spent in the media sector through various mechanisms. The pressures that appear are most often political and financial in nature. The verbal pressures on RTS by government representatives, especially the President and other high-ranking government representatives, are worrying. Non-profit media and their journalists have been the most frequent targets of various types of attacks and pressures, insults, targeting, threats and assaults in recent years. Women journalists, especially those in investigative roles or leadership positions, face increased risks of harassment, including verbal attacks online, anonymous threats, and smear campaigns.

## SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS

Serbia has a mechanism for reporting serious threats, allowing journalists relatively easy access to the system. The dysfunctionality of the system is evident in the increase in real threats and attacks and journalists' reluctance to report, mainly due to distrust in the support and work of the competent authorities. Journalists often do not have access to adequate physical protection and psychological assistance. Many female journalists, especially at the local level, do not report threats and pressure due to a lack of trust in institutions and doubts that they will be adequately protected, as confirmed by numerous examples of ineffective action by institutions or rejection of their reports. Institutions have not established a practice of publicly condemning threats of attacks on journalists. Government representatives not only do not condemn attacks on independent journalists, but with their negative public narrative they incite such attacks and initiate such attacks themselves. Government representatives and public officials create an inflammatory atmosphere with their statements and create a ground for attacks on independent and investigative journalists. The lack of operational independence of the police in their work also greatly affects their attitude towards journalists. The police are currently unable to effectively resolve cases of abuse of power by their officers, and numerous incidents of assault by police officers remain unprocessed due to delays in internal control procedures. The situation is further aggravated by cases of illegal detention and surveillance of journalists, which the police refuse to acknowledge. Dozens of journalists have been targeted by devices such as Cellebrite and Pegasus. The number of all forms of threats and attacks has increased significantly.

## GENERAL CONCLUSION

Regulatory amendments intended to strengthen media freedoms have once again been misused, and a new opportunity to improve the position of journalists and the media has been missed. The procedures for appointing members of the REM Council were full of irregularities and manipulated by the ruling party. Serbia operates within a system marked by ongoing abuses, discriminatory and arbitrary application of other laws aimed at intimidating journalists. Low wages, disregard for working hours, unpaid overtime, uncertainty surrounding media survival, pressure from various sources, and negative impacts on mental health are key challenges journalists face. Non-profit media and their journalists have been the most frequent targets of various types of attacks and pressures, insults, targeting, threats and assaults in recent years. Representatives of the authorities not only do not condemn attacks on independent journalists, but with their violent narrative in public they incite and initiate such attacks. The police are currently unable to effectively address cases of abuse of authority by their officers, leaving numerous assaults by police unprocessed due to procedural delays. The situation is further aggravated by cases of illegal detention and surveillance of journalists, which the police refuse to acknowledge. The overall state of safety is at its lowest point in Serbia's history, and the number of attacks in all forms is rapidly increasing.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### DIMENSION A: LEGAL SAFEGUARDS AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION

- It is necessary to make additional and complete amendments to the adopted media laws, which must remain in accordance with the rights acquired and guaranteed by the applicable regulations, the Media Strategy.
- It is important to begin drafting a new Media Strategy (Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia) as soon as possible, given that the existing one expires this year. The development of the new strategy must include all newly emerging circumstances, alignment with the new EU media legislative framework, but also the emergence and impact of artificial intelligence (AI);
- It is necessary to continue the process of amendments in accordance with the legislative framework of the European Union, and in this sense, the norms applied in Serbia must be aligned with the EMFA, DSA, DMA, AI Act, and Anti-SLAPP directives of the European Commission;
- Amendments to the Law on Public Information and Media and the Law on Electronic Media must not be limited to individual comments from the European Commission, but must adhere to the requirements and recommendations from the Strategy and, in

particular, be aligned with the missing provisions from the Audiovisual Media Services Directive;

- It is necessary to draft all missing by-laws and regulations and amend those that misuse the adopted regulations (such as by-laws assessing members of project co-financing committees or statutory provisions of REM);
- The Law on Public Service Broadcasting must be revised and adopted in a procedure that includes all relevant participants;
- Comments and suggestions from the European Commission must be available to all members of the working groups, and the state must clearly and transparently report to all parties in the procedure;
- The actions of institutions implementing media laws must be in accordance with the prescribed procedures. They must ensure the protection of the legally stipulated competitive co-financing, liability for violations of procedures and misuse of funds;
- It is necessary to carry out appropriate oversight of all procedures by which funds are allocated to media and production companies, especially irresponsible public and other procurement procedures that result in the misdirection of funds intended for topics that can only be implemented through competitive co-financing;
- The work of REM must be improved in practice by implementing greater oversight and raising the level of responsibility of decision-makers. All activities from the sessions of the REM Council that include proposals and recommendations of the professional service must be regularly published on the REM's website;
- Media monitoring during election campaigns must be precisely and clearly methodologically regulated, with objective observations and reports;
- It is necessary to complete the new procedure for selecting members of the REM Council in full compliance with the law;
- Determine responsibility for the failures made in initiating and implementing the previous procedure, as well as the responsibility of the Chairwoman of the Committee on Culture and Information for the failure to elect members of the Council of the Regulatory Authority in accordance with the legal deadline.
- The acting Committee of the National Assembly must act in accordance with the given competencies, which also relate to determining irregularities in the proposers and received candidacies;



- The election of members of the Programme Councils of public service broadcasters should begin as soon as possible within the legally prescribed deadline.

## **DIMENSION B: JOURNALISTS' POSITION IN NEWSROOMS**

- Further strengthen the independence of public service broadcasters by amending new laws and by-laws;
- Strategically plan and work on developing dedicated anti-SLAPP regulatory systems to protect journalists and media outlets from malicious lawsuits, and to establish accountability—particularly for government officials who abuse such legal actions.;
- Examine all existing legal mechanisms currently in our legislation in order to align them with the Council of Europe directive and recommendations regarding SLAPP lawsuits;
- Harmonize case law in proceedings against journalists for damages related to the publication of information with the practice of the European Court of Human Rights;
- Ensure better labour and legal status of journalists and other media professionals: by signing a sectoral collective agreement with the aim of ensuring better working conditions, support for trade union organizations, more efficient inspections in order to reduce undeclared work;
- Establish measures and procedures to enhance the status of female journalists, editors, and women working in the media, and create better conditions to increase their representation in management roles;
- Ensure greater independence of journalists and editorial staff in relation to media owners and management by signing special acts that would enable such independence or provide for the signing of an annex to the employment contract that defines the professional rights and obligations of journalists and editors.

## **DIMENSION C: SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS**

- Government officials must act responsibly, stop violent narratives and do everything necessary to reduce tensions, as well as urgently condemn all events that threaten the safety of students, journalists and citizens who dare to think and speak critically;
- Competent authorities must conduct investigations into all campaigns of hate speech and incitement to violence in society by government officials and powerful people;
- It is necessary to conduct urgent investigations and resolve all cases of threats and attacks on journalists, students and activists, especially those initiated by government officials and police officers at protests;

- It is necessary to conduct urgent investigations and resolve all cases of confiscation of phones and other devices, as well as the use of monitoring tools against journalists, students and activists by members of the police and SIA;
- Clear, unequivocal and non-selective condemnations of all violence against journalists, students and activists by high-ranking public officials should be ensured in order to convey a message of unacceptable behaviour;
- The police must process and resolve all cases of attacks on journalists by their officers;
- The Ministry of the Interior must condemn all cases of attacks and incidents against journalists and the media by their officers;
- Police officers who act in cases of attacks on journalists must act conscientiously and responsibly and must act promptly, without delay, on the orders of public prosecutors regarding the collection of information and reports in cases in which journalists have been harmed;
- It is necessary to continue the work and training of police officers and public prosecutors, especially on the topics of freedom of expression and freedom of the media, with an aspect of sensitivity and secondary victimization of the injured parties;
- Police officers must undergo mandatory training in understanding the position of those injured by criminal offences, because the largest number of refusals to report are associated with negative treatment in the police and public prosecutor's offices;
- It is necessary to strengthen the capacities of public prosecutors' offices and the police, rather than undermining them through the reassignment of trained personnel and contact points to other departments. Certain divisions within public prosecutors' offices are seriously compromised by constant changes in the annual assignment schedule, resulting in cases involving threats and attacks on journalists being handled by prosecutors who lack the necessary knowledge and experience;
- It is necessary to continue working on changing the practice of understanding criminal offences in order to better understand the way in which threats are made or written in connection with specific criminal offences that protect journalists, especially when it comes to the issue of endangering safety in the online space;
- It is necessary to raise the level of sensitivity of judges and public prosecutors when it comes to journalistic work and awareness of the consequences of threats and attacks. Judges should be actively involved in finding solutions that will help change the practice in understanding criminal offences, especially threats to safety, as well as to improve it for the benefit of injured journalists.

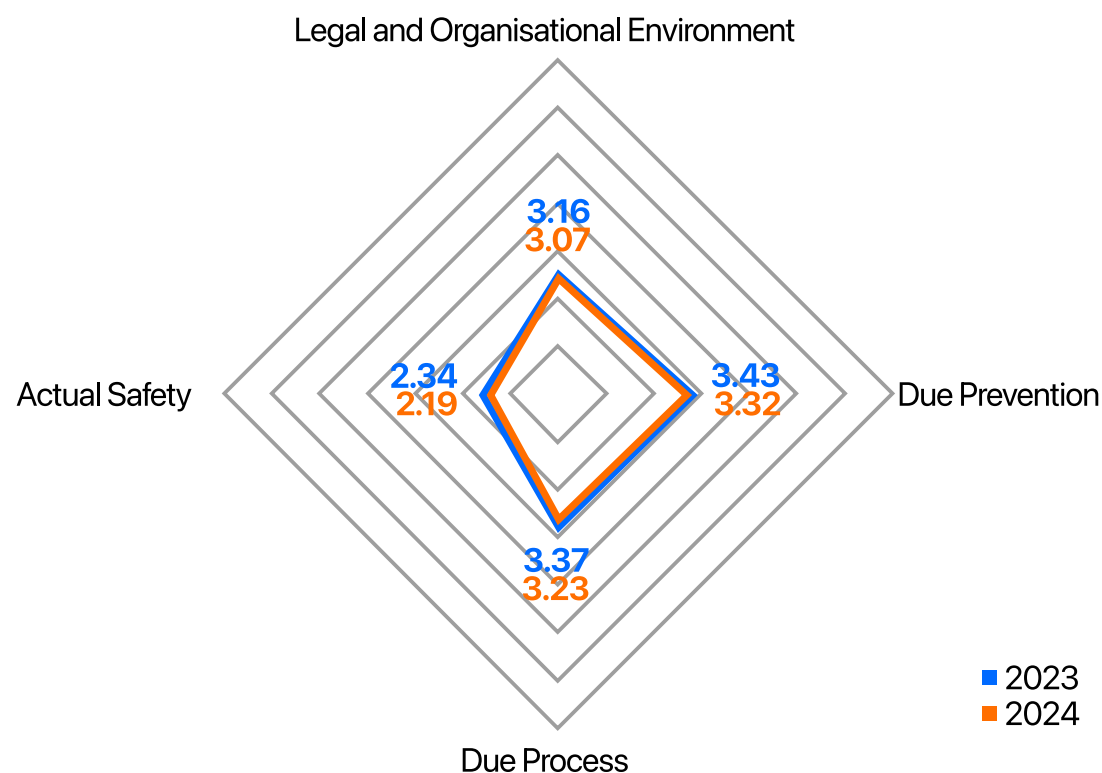
# IV

## Journalist Safety Index in Serbia – 2024

This section of the report presents the Journalists' Safety Index for 2024 in graphical form, compared to the previous year, 2023. For each of the four dimensions and all 19 indicators, a brief summary of the key changes that occurred in 2024 is provided.

A detailed explanation of the data and changes for each individual indicator of the Index can be found in the narrative section of the report:

Indicators of Journalists Safety Index	Narrative report
<b>I Legal and Organisational Environment</b>	
Legal provisions related to defamation and their application do not create a chilling effect on journalists and the media	<a href="#">A.6</a>
Confidentiality of journalists' sources is guaranteed in the legislation and respected by the authorities	<a href="#">A.8</a>
Other laws are enforced objectively and allow journalists and other media actors to work freely and safely	<a href="#">A.7</a>
Journalists are free to pursue their profession and to establish, join and participate in their associations	<a href="#">A.9</a>
Job positions of journalists are stable and protected at the workplace	<a href="#">B.1</a>
<b>II Due Prevention</b>	
Journalists and media actors have access to immediate and effective protective measures	<a href="#">C.1</a>
Journalists and other media actors (whose lives or physical integrity are at real and immediate risk) have access to special protection or safety mechanisms	<a href="#">C.2</a>
Female journalists have access to legal measures and support mechanisms when faced with gender-based threats, harassment or violence	<a href="#">C.3</a>
Practice of regular public condemnation of threats and attacks on journalists and media has been established	<a href="#">C.4</a>
Police authorities are sensitive to journalists' protection issue	<a href="#">C.5</a>
<b>III Due Process</b>	
Specialised units/officers are equipped with expertise for investigating attacks and violence against journalists	<a href="#">C.6</a>
Investigations of serious physical attacks on journalists and other media actors are carried out efficiently (independently, thoroughly and promptly)	<a href="#">C.7</a>
Journalists and other media actors are efficiently protected from various forms of online harassment	<a href="#">C.8</a>
Investigations of all types of attacks and violence against journalists and other media actors are carried out transparently	<a href="#">C.9</a>
Quality statistics collection systems established by state authorities to stem impunity	<a href="#">C.10</a>
<b>IV. Actual Safety</b>	
Non-physical threats and harassments	<a href="#">C.11</a>
Threats against the lives and physical safety of journalists	<a href="#">C.12</a>
Actual attacks	<a href="#">C.13</a>
Threats and attacks on media outlets and journalists' associations	<a href="#">C.14</a>



	2023	2024		Main new developments in each dimension
Legal and Organisational Environment	3.16	3.07	↓	Influence enables politicians and powerful individuals to initiate lawsuits against journalists more frequently, which creates the impression of greater protection. Journalists, activists, and students were detained or summoned for talks, during which their mobile devices were confiscated and later returned with communication monitoring tools installed. The number of SLAPP lawsuits is rising, accompanied by a significant increase in cases where journalists face obstacles in their work or are barred from accessing and reporting on certain events. Journalists face significant challenges due to economic hardships and political pressures from all sides.
Due Prevention	3.43	3.32	↓	The system for reporting threats and attacks is relatively functional, but journalists remain concerned about the ineffectiveness of investigations and the authorities' response. However, the majority of female journalists in Serbia who experience harassment, threats, or attacks do not report these incidents. The government representatives not only do not condemn attacks on independent journalists, but in fact incite those types of attacks with their violent narrative or even start them. Police officers lack sensitivity toward journalists and are insufficiently trained to provide even basic protection.
Due Process	3.37	3.23	↓	The police often fail to act on prosecutors' orders, while prosecutors do not respond to delays and omissions nor fully utilise the measures available to prevent possible abuses. The police are unable to effectively resolve cases involving abuse of authority by their officers. Investigations are generally independent of the subjects involved; however, in some important cases, the distinction between executive interference and prosecutorial independence becomes blurred. Journalists as injured parties in Serbia have not had effective access to investigative procedures. They reported experiencing online harassment, death threats, also threats of rape, physical violence, defamation, trolling, cyberbullying, impersonation, and sexual harassment. Reported cases are not entered or get removed from the prosecutor's office databases.
Actual Safety	2.34	2.19	↓	There were 23 cases of nonphysical threats and harassments. The situation has deteriorated compared to previous years. Of particular concern is the continued increase in the number of such threats in practice. At least 80 cases of serious threats have been recorded, most of which are direct threats made on social media and in person, posing a danger to the lives and safety of journalists and their family members. Unfortunately, most of the cases remain unresolved. The number of physical attacks increased to 23, and each incident was reported to the police or public prosecutor's office, or were prosecuted ex officio. In the majority of cases, the attacks involve men and women journalists and their TV crews while covering certain events. Police officers also attacked journalists, confiscated their phones, and installed applications to monitor their communications.
<b>Journalists' Safety Index</b>	<b>2.83</b>	<b>2.70</b>	<b>↓</b>	



# Legal and Organisational Environment





#### INDICATOR 1.1

### — LEGAL PROVISIONS RELATED TO DEFAMATION AND THEIR APPLICATION DO NOT CREATE A CHILLING EFFECT ON JOURNALISTS AND THE MEDIA

**Score for 2023: 3.20 / Score za 2024: 3.06**

Although state officials do not have formal privileges, their influence and resources enable them to initiate lawsuits against journalists more frequently, creating the impression of greater protection. The courts in their practice sometimes favour plaintiffs, particularly when they are public figures. The regulations governing compensation for damage to journalists' honour and reputation are not stringent, but the main issue lies in how these regulations are applied by the courts. It is precisely due to this practice that a judgment against KRIK was adjudicated, serving as a reminder to journalists to exercise greater caution when mentioning the official who is a head of SIA.

#### INDICATOR 1.2

### — CONFIDENTIALITY OF JOURNALISTS' SOURCES IS GUARANTEED IN THE LEGISLATION AND RESPECTED BY THE AUTHORITIES

**Score for 2023: 3.60 / Score za 2024: 3.43**

Rights of journalistic sources should be guaranteed and protected under law. However, in practice, the situation is considerably more difficult. At least two arrests of journalists through abusive procedures aimed at gaining physical access to their mobile devices, along with additional suspicion of communication interception in other cases, raise serious concerns about direct attempts to uncover sources. Journalists, activists, and students were detained or summoned for talks, during which their mobile devices were confiscated and fitted with communication monitoring tools. As a result, journalists do not feel free or safe to access information sources, particularly when it comes to maintaining contact with them.

#### INDICATOR 1.3

### — OTHER LAWS ARE ENFORCED OBJECTIVELY AND ALLOW JOURNALISTS AND OTHER MEDIA ACTORS TO WORK FREELY AND SAFELY

**Score for 2023: 3.10 / Score za 2024: 2.97**

The State of Serbia has not dealt with SLAPP lawsuits, nor has it shown any intention or activity to recognize and introduce anti-SLAPP measures into the legal system. Serbia recognizes the institution of abuse of rights in civil proceedings. Although recognized by the civil sector as potentially effective defense mechanisms, these legal instruments are rarely applied. Lawsuits against journalists and the media are filed on various grounds. In 2024, at least 22 lawsuits with elements of SLAPP were recorded, and journalists were detained in rigged proceedings where police

and security services abused procedures, confiscating their phones and other work-related communication devices.

INDICATOR 1.4

— **JOURNALISTS ARE FREE TO PURSUIT THEIR PROFESSION AND TO ESTABLISH, JOIN AND PARTICIPATE IN THEIR ASSOCIATIONS**

**Score for 2023: 3.00 / Score za 2024: 3.00**

Journalists in Serbia do not have to be licenced to do journalistic work. IJAS recorded over 40 cases of journalists being in various ways hindered from doing their job, banned to enter and report from particular events, and the cases of them not getting invitation to press conferences or events of public interest. A group of so-called GONGO associations is active in Serbia, hindering the work of relevant associations and organisations. These associations are primarily active during processes conducted by state authorities, such as when amendments to regulations are proposed, or when needed, they promote topics important for supporting the authorities.

INDICATOR 1.5

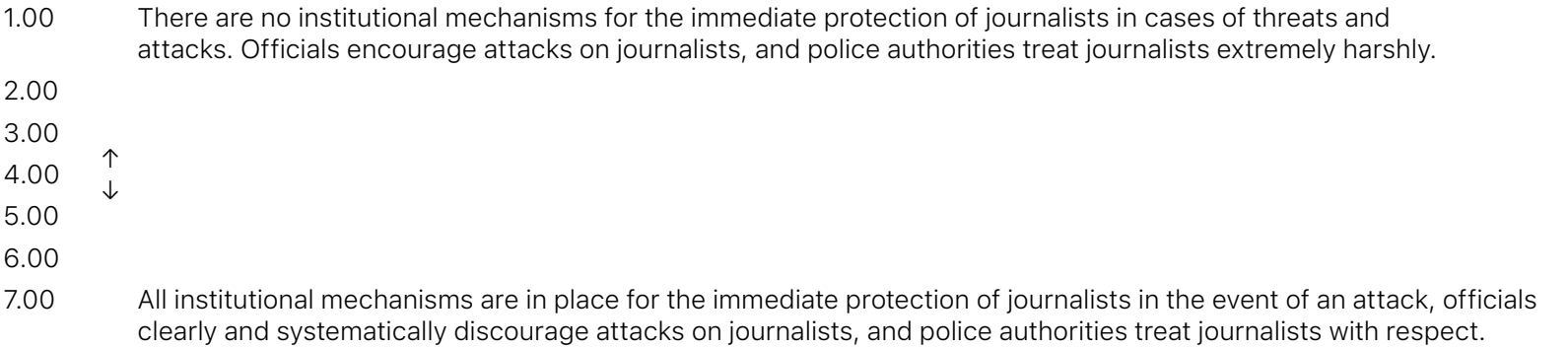
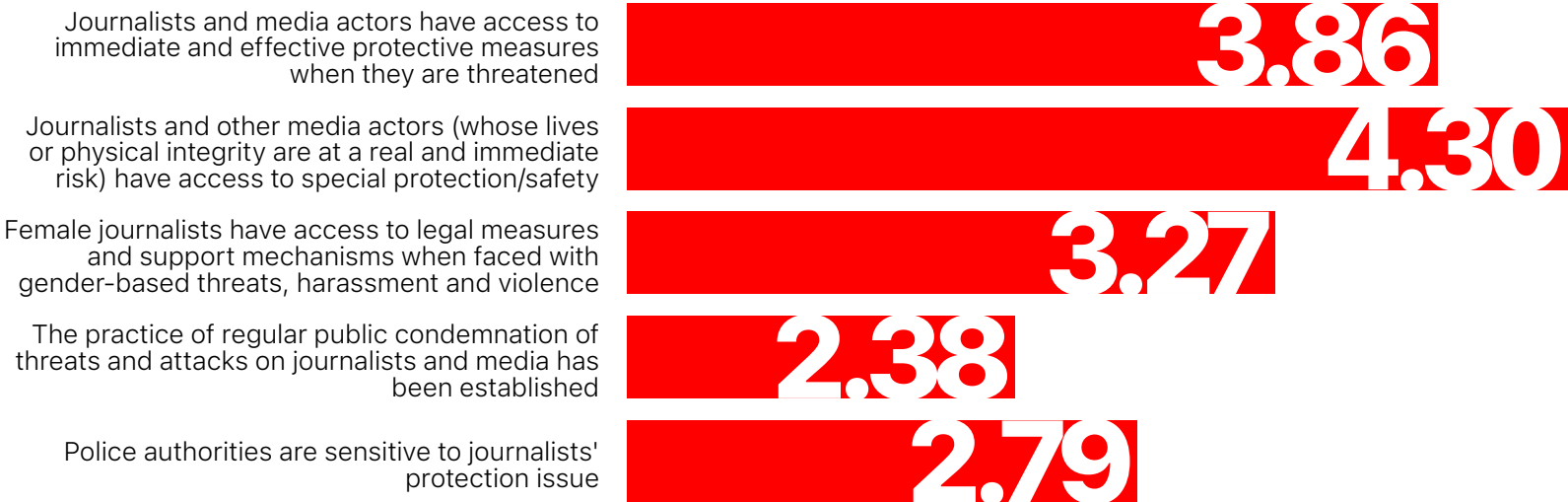
— **JOB POSITIONS OF JOURNALISTS ARE STABLE AND PROTECTED AT THE WORKPLACE**

**Score for 2023: 2.91 / Score za 2024: 2.89**

In 2024, the social and economic position of journalists and media workers in Serbia remains highly unfavourable, characterised by unsafe working conditions and restricted labour rights. Journalists and media workers in Serbia face very difficult working conditions that worsen each year. Besides economic and political pressures, the most serious issues include low salaries, unpaid overtime, disregard of working hours, and media instability, which force journalists to work in multiple newsrooms or work in other sectors unrelated to journalism.



# Due Prevention



#### INDICATOR 2.1

##### — JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA ACTORS HAVE ACCESS TO IMMEDIATE AND EFFECTIVE PROTECTIVE MEASURES

**Score for 2023: 4.01 / Score za 2024: 3.86**

The system for reporting threats and attacks is relatively functional, enabling journalists to easily notify the competent authorities. The mechanism includes guidelines requiring prosecutors and police to respond urgently within short deadlines, as well as designated contact points for rapid reporting and case verification throughout 2024. In Serbia, 44 cases were established in connection with threats and attacks on journalists. Journalists have repeatedly expressed concern about the effectiveness of investigations and the authorities' response, especially given the many cases where the prosecutor's office has not yet received information from the police following requests.

#### INDICATOR 2.2

##### — JOURNALISTS AND OTHER MEDIA ACTORS (WHOSE LIVES OR PHYSICAL INTEGRITY ARE AT REAL AND IMMEDIATE RISK) HAVE ACCESS TO SPECIAL PROTECTION OR SAFETY MECHANISMS

**Score for 2023: 4.30 / Score za 2024: 4.30**

SWG aims to enhance communication and coordination between competent institutions and media organisations, as well as to monitor cases involving threats to journalists' safety. A system of contact points has been established within journalists' associations, prosecutor's offices, and police departments. There is no clear data on the existence of a formalised, systematic risk assessment procedure to identify the specific protection needs of journalists or other citizens who are victims. Only journalists' associations have helplines and provide free legal assistance to journalists facing threats, attacks, or pressures.

#### INDICATOR 2.3

##### — FEMALE JOURNALISTS HAVE ACCESS TO LEGAL MEASURES AND SUPPORT MECHANISMS WHEN FACED WITH GENDER-BASED THREATS, HARASSMENT OR VIOLENCE

**Score for 2023: 3.36 / Score za 2024: 3.27**

Serbia has committed to aligning its legislation with the standards of the Istanbul Convention, leading to the adoption and amendment of several laws and strategic documents aimed at preventing and combating gender-based violence. However, in practice, this role is carried out primarily by non-governmental organisations. Unfortunately, the systemic changes did not provide additional protection specifically for female journalists. Most women journalists in Serbia who experience harassment, threats, or attacks do not report these incidents.

INDICATOR 2.4

— **PRACTICE OF REGULAR PUBLIC CONDEMNATION  
OF THREATS AND ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS AND  
MEDIA HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED**

**Score for 2023: 2.56 / Score za 2024: 2.38**

The institutions failed to establish the practice of publicly condemning threats against journalists. On the contrary, the government representatives not only do not condemn attacks on independent journalists, but in fact incite those types of attacks with their violent narrative or even start the attacks themselves. Pro-government media play a significant role in creating a hostile environment, often under the direct or indirect influence of public officials.

INDICATOR 2.5

— **POLICE AUTHORITIES ARE SENSITIVE TO  
JOURNALISTS' PROTECTION ISSUE**

**Score for 2022: 2.94 / Score za 2024: 2.79**

Police officers are not adequately trained to uphold basic human rights or to recognize the role of journalists in a democratic society. The implementation of the rulebook on assistance to victims of criminal offences remains unclear. The attitude of police officers toward journalists is marked by violence, ignoring journalists wearing press badges, occasional attacks, wiretapping, and a refusal to accept responsibility for their actions. In the past year, there were several cases of unjustified detention of journalists by the police.





# Due Process

Specialised investigation units and/or officers are equipped with relevant expertise for investigating attacks and violence against journalists



Investigations of serious physical attacks on journalists and other media actors are carried out efficiently (independently, thoroughly and promptly)



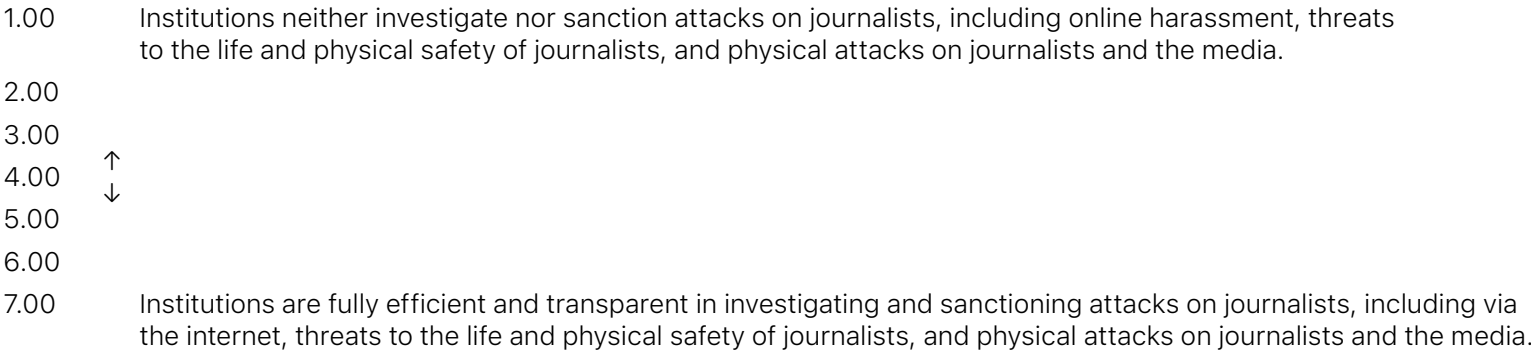
Journalists and other media actors are efficiently protected from various forms of online harassment



Investigations of all types of attacks and violence against journalists and other media actors are carried out transparently



Quality statistics collection systems established by state authorities to stem impunity



#### INDICATOR 3.1

##### — SPECIALISED UNITS/OFFICERS ARE EQUIPPED WITH EXPERTISE FOR INVESTIGATING ATTACKS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST JOURNALISTS

**Score for 2023: 4.53 / Score za 2024: 4.44**

Contact points were established to ensure more efficient responses to incidents, improve coordination between institutions, and monitor procedures until their completion. Their main tasks are to monitor case progress, coordinate between the police and prosecutor's office, report new incidents, and check the status of previously reported cases. The competent authorities lack adequate understanding of the challenges journalists are facing and the real threats they encounter. The police often fail to act on prosecutors' orders, while prosecutors do not respond to delays or omissions and fail to utilise all available measures against potential abuses by police officers. The police are unable to effectively address cases of abuse of authority by their officers.

#### INDICATOR 3.2

##### — INVESTIGATIONS OF SERIOUS PHYSICAL ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS AND OTHER MEDIA ACTORS ARE CARRIED OUT EFFICIENTLY (INDEPENDENTLY, THOROUGHLY AND PROMPTLY)

**Score for 2023: 2.95 / Score za 2024: 2.80**

Investigations are generally conducted independently of those they involve; however, in strategically important cases, the distinction between the interference of executive representatives and the supposed independence of acting prosecutors often vanishes. Receiving and filing reports is done rather quickly, but further course of investigation remains problematic. Procedural deadlines in criminal proceedings are frequently overlooked, adversely impacting investigations and the course of cases. The work of the special department for cybercrime is seriously undermined by frequent changes to the annual schedule, with public prosecutors being transferred to general departments and replaced by those lacking specialised knowledge.

#### INDICATOR 3.3

##### — JOURNALISTS AND OTHER MEDIA ACTORS ARE EFFICIENTLY PROTECTED FROM VARIOUS FORMS OF ONLINE HARASSMENT

**Score for 2023: 3.10 / Score za 2024: 2.93**

Regulations stipulating protection under criminal law provide good protection for journalists and media whose safety is jeopardised. The journalistic community emphasises the importance of prosecuting certain criminal offences that are currently neglected, which could play a key role in combating so-called organised smear campaigns. Journalists reported a broad spectrum of online harassment, including death threats, also threats of physical violence,

insults, defamation, trolling, cyberbullying, impersonation, and sexual harassment or threats. The draft criminal law regulations sparked strong reactions from the professional public assessing the proposed amendments as populist.

#### INDICATOR 3.4

##### — INVESTIGATIONS OF ALL TYPES OF ATTACKS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST JOURNALISTS AND OTHER MEDIA ACTORS ARE CARRIED OUT TRANSPARENTLY

**Score for 2023: 2.70 / Score za 2024: 2.55**

Victim journalists in Serbia did not have effective access to investigative procedures. In many cases, journalists did not receive adequate information about investigations, had limited access to case files, and faced difficulties presenting evidence. The transparency of the process was limited by delays, lack of public data, and institutional weaknesses. Political pressures, including officials' comments and the transfers of prosecutors, alongside social pressures such as the glorification of attackers, bullies, and those who threaten journalists, have significantly impacted the judiciary's work and the press's ability to communicate effectively.

#### INDICATOR 3.5

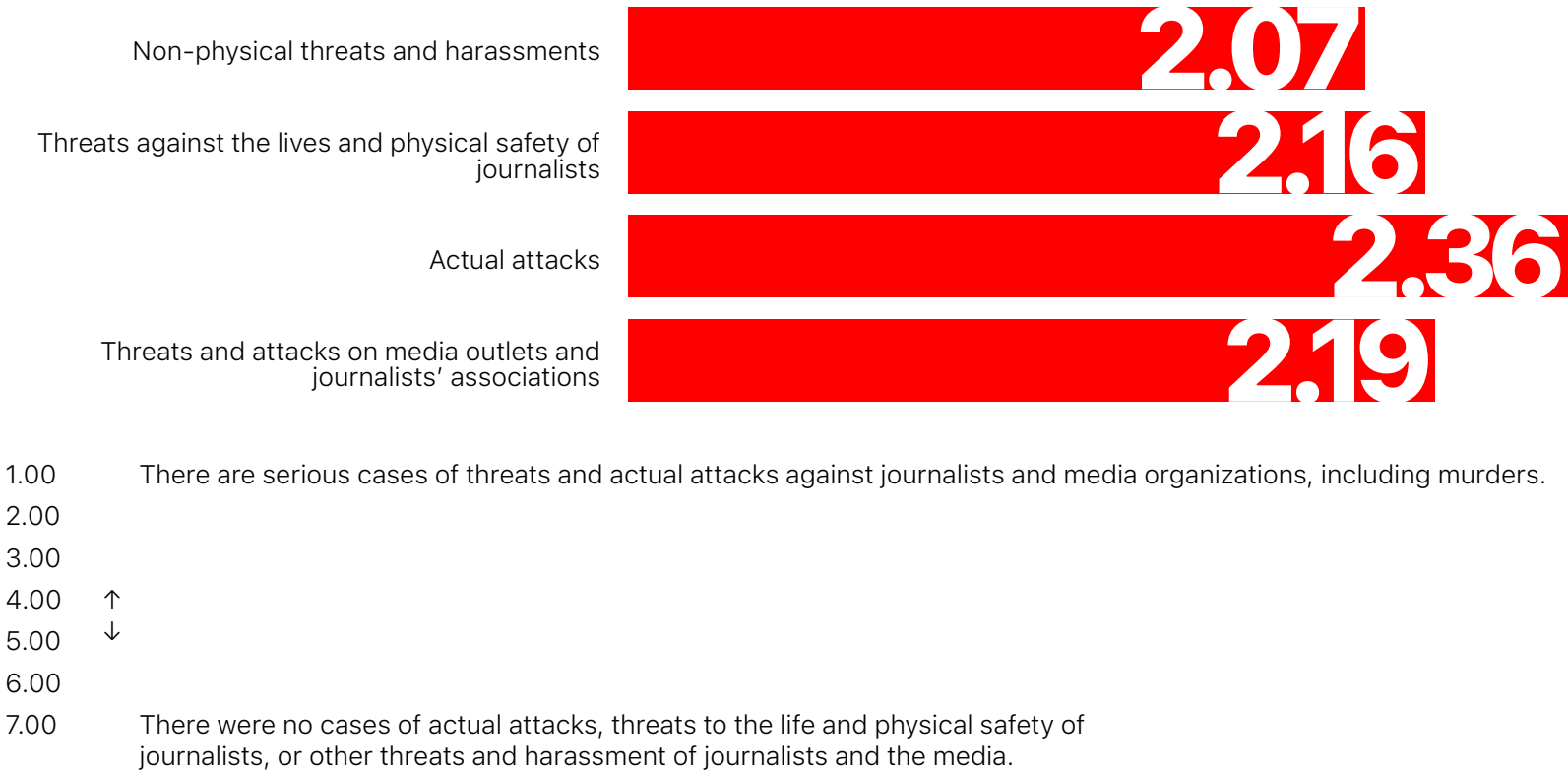
##### — QUALITY STATISTICS COLLECTION SYSTEMS ESTABLISHED BY STATE AUTHORITIES TO STEM IMPUNITY

**Score for 2023: 3.57 / Score za 2024: 3.42**

In 2024, the public prosecutor's offices, on the basis of filed criminal charges/reports, have initiated 62 cases pertaining to the events involving 65 individuals who were harmed, namely 49 individual persons performing public duties in the field of information. It has been observed that certain reported cases are either not entered into or get removed from the databases. It happens due to various reasons: closed cases, offences that are initially not related to attacks against journalists, lack of evidence indicating that it was an attack or threat against journalists due to the job they carry out. Starting from early 2025, data are no longer provided to journalist representatives due to a general freezing of status in cooperation with institutions.

IV

Actual Safety



#### INDICATOR 4.1

##### — NON-PHYSICAL THREATS AND HARASSMENTS

**Score for 2023: 2.25 / Score za 2024: 2.07**

In 2024, 23 cases of non-physical threats and harassment were registered. The situation has deteriorated compared to previous years. It is particularly concerning that the number of such threats is steadily increasing, and that journalists often avoid reporting them because they do not differentiate these from more serious threats. Serbian criminal law practice does not regard indirect written or spoken threats – including calls for murder, rape, or physical attacks – as punishable offenses. Such cases are generally not prosecuted, so journalists avoid reporting them.

#### INDICATOR 4.2

##### — THREATS AGAINST THE LIVES AND PHYSICAL SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS

**Score for 2023: 2.38 / Score za 2024: 2.16**

There was 80 cases of serious threats against female journalists, their male colleagues and persons working in the newsroom. These are very serious threats, which in most cases represent direct threats made on social media and in person, and are dangerous to the life and physical integrity of journalists and their family members. Unfortunately, most cases have remained unresolved. There have been threats of murder, physical attacks, rape and violence not only against journalists, but also against their children and other family members. There have been threats against entire newsrooms, by setting bombs and mass murders.

#### INDICATOR 4.3

##### — ACTUAL ATTACKS

**Score for 2023: 2.53 / Score za 2024: 2.36**

This year, 23 assaults were recorded, and each of them was reported to the police or public prosecutors' offices, or they were prosecuted *ex officio*. In the majority of cases it concerns the attacks on men and women journalists and their TV crews when covering some events. Journalists were also attacked by police officers. They were attacked at polling stations and at anti-corruption protests organised in Belgrade and Novi Sad. Since November 2024, safety has deteriorated, and 11 assaults were recorded in that period.



INDICATOR 4.4

— **THREATS AND ATTACKS ON MEDIA OUTLETS AND JOURNALISTS' ASSOCIATIONS**

**Score for 2023: 2.21 / Score za 2024: 2.19**

Four serious cases of threats and attacks on media outlets and associations were recorded. The situation remains unchanged from previous periods, as independent media continue to face hundreds of insults, pressures, and various forms of deliberate targeting that are often not classified as unlawful acts within the framework of criminal law. These incidents frequently involve attempts to gather outside independent television stations; threats against journalists themselves are characterised by outbursts of anger or intentional efforts to damage journalists' equipment or cars..

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**Author**  
Rade Đurić

**Research associate**  
Kruna Savović

**Reviewers**  
Aleksandra Krstić  
Lidija Komlen Nikolić

**Serbian Language Editing**  
Nataša Polić

**Translation**  
Anica Milenković

**Cover photo**  
Andrija Vukelić

**Design**  
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