

**UPGRADING OF THE PREVENTION AND RESPONSE SYSTEM  
AND MECHANISMS IN CASES OF THREATS TO THE SAFETY  
AND LIFE OF FEMALE AND MALE JOURNALISTS IN SERBIA**

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## **Report on Media Outlets Operating in Vojvodina**

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**ANEM and the Center for the Development of Local  
Media**

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## Introduction

According to a report by Freedom House, Serbia is among the countries that have recorded the greatest decline in rights and freedoms over the past ten years.

The report states that in 2019 the country fell from the category of “free” to “partly free,” and has since lost an additional 11 points, given that the state of rights and freedoms has continued to deteriorate.

“Attacks on journalists and increased control over the media have been among the most prominent features of this decline,” Freedom House emphasizes.

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On November 1, 2024, a canopy collapsed at the railway station in Novi Sad, killing fifteen people on the spot. Several months later, the sixteenth victim died in hospital. This tragic event triggered a wave of student protests, which began in Novi Sad and spread throughout Serbia. These events demonstrated the level of repression in Serbia. Some of the indicators include the arrest of students; an incident in which a female student in Novi Sad was beaten by individuals who exited the premises of the Serbian Progressive Party, followed by the fall of the Government of the Republic of Serbia; the alleged use of a sonic weapon at a large student protest in Belgrade on March 15; the filing of criminal charges against the Rector of the University of Belgrade, Vladan Đokić; and others.

Journalists reporting on protest-related events have also been targeted.

Since the beginning of 2025 alone, the Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia has recorded four physical attacks on journalists, 24 instances of pressure, and 15 verbal threats. The Media Scene Monitoring Report for February 2025 points to a discrepancy between recorded cases and officially formed cases. Namely, in the first two months of 2025, the Supreme Public Prosecutor’s Office formed 11 cases based on criminal complaints (4 in January and 7 in February), concerning 12 individuals, 7 male and 5 female. The Special Prosecutor’s Office for High-Tech Crime opened 6 cases involving 7 individuals, 2 male and

5 female.

The largest number of cases of threats and pressure listed in the Monitoring Report occurred in Vojvodina. The following cases were noted:

Journalist Ksenija Pavkov of N1 was repeatedly threatened while reporting from a Serbian Progressive Party gathering in Sremska Mitrovica, organized on the occasion of Statehood Day on February 15. She was subjected to insults and other disturbing messages.

During protests by pupils and students in Inđija, an unknown older man who called demonstrators "Ustaše" attacked IN Media journalists Verica Marinčić and Miodrag Blečić, directing the same insults at them. On that occasion, the attacker struck Verica Marinčić in order to knock the mobile phone out of her hand with which she was recording the event.

That same month, Verica Marinčić was verbally abused at a press conference by the Mayor of Inđija, Marko Gašić.

A year earlier, Verica Marinčić had been physically removed by security from the municipal building in Inđija, where she was reporting on a protest by residents of Čortanovci over the closure of a railway station. Before being removed, the Head of the Mayor's Office in Inđija, Nemanja Milojević, told her to leave the building, said she was not allowed to record, and attempted to take her phone.

In February, journalists were prevented from covering public events. Just before the start of the Novi Sad City Assembly session on February 24, at which a new mayor was to be elected, security personnel of the Assembly and private security thoroughly searched journalists and kept them isolated and locked in a room for a period of time.

The editorial office of the newspaper Zrenjanin received insults and a death threat via Facebook, which the editor linked to their reporting on a protest march by students from Zrenjanin to Vršac.

Dinko Gruhonjić has been the target of an orchestrated campaign for months. In February, new threats were sent to him and his family via social media.

Threats were also sent to the President of the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV), Ana Lalić Hegediš.

The threats against the association's president were preceded by a break-in into the NDNV premises.

The most recent case of an attack on journalists in Vojvodina occurred in mid-April, when Zoran Strika, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of 021, was physically attacked while reporting on citizens departing for Aleksandar Vučić's rally in Belgrade. He was filming an incident on the quay when two young men knocked a Novi Sad resident to the ground and began beating him for recording the gathering with his phone. They then took his phone and threw it into the Danube. When another young man noticed that Strika was filming the incident, he physically

attacked him. As reported by 021, Strika identified himself as a journalist, and since the attacker did not release him, the editor called Ognjen Dopuđ, Director of the Provincial Fund for European Affairs and Development, who was nearby, asking him to remove the individuals who attacked him. Although Dopuđ did not react, the attacker eventually left. Half an hour later, Strika lent his phone to the assaulted young man, at which point three hooded individuals approached, took Strika's phone, and also threw it into the Danube.

In this report, we present how editors and journalists from media outlets in Vojvodina perceive the level of safety of journalists and media professionals in the region; their training for reporting in crisis situations; and whether they have experienced problems with authorities due to their reporting. They also spoke about the extent to which they face political pressure.

The functioning of media also requires a certain degree of financial stability; therefore, the second part of the report addresses the business operations of the media outlets we interviewed, as well as staffing challenges.

The data were obtained through interviews with Zoran Strika, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of 021; Darko Šper, Chief Commissioner of the Nezavisnost Trade Union at Radio Television of Vojvodina; Miran Dmitrović, Editor-in-Chief of the Magločistač portal; Sava Majstorov, journalist at the SOinfo portal; Tijana Janković, Editor-in-Chief of the WebInfo portal; Zoran Đurić, President of the "Info-NB" Association; Jovana Danilov, Commercial Director of BAP Vesti; Vladimir Dorčov Valtnerov, founder and Editor-in-Chief of Storyteller; Dinko Gruhonjić, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Autonomija, Editor-in-Chief of the Vojvodina Investigative-Analytical Center (VOICE), and Program Director of NDNV; and Aleksandar Tokin, Editor-in-Chief of the 013 Info portal.

A total of 23 media outlets from Vojvodina were invited to participate in the research.

## Endangering the Safety of Journalists

The average rating given by interviewees for the safety of journalists in their local communities in Vojvodina is 3 (on a scale of 1 to 5).

Their experience shows that journalists' safety depends on the specific event being covered. Cases such as those mentioned above demonstrate that the level of safety is deteriorating.

*Whether the level of safety decreases or increases depends on the event itself. As a rule, when attending events organized by the authorities or events called by them, the level of safety drops to around 2 or even 1. A rating of 1 means that a physical attack without serious injuries could occur. When events are not organized by the authorities, safety is less threatened, though some form of discomfort may still be expected.*

*Considering that over the past five months protests—both civic and student-led—have been at the center of all developments, and that certain media outlets regularly report from*

*them, these outlets are often targeted by passers-by, party activists of the Serbian Progressive Party, or anyone who happens to perceive journalists as legitimate targets.*

*I have no intention of causing panic or exaggerating things. It depends from case to case, from locality to locality, and from journalist to journalist. However, various daily incidents indicate that we are not safe while reporting, often not even while sitting in our newsrooms, and I would say we are gradually approaching a point where we will begin to question our safety even in our own homes.*

*Local media are isolated. They are perceived by the regime as opposition, which they are not, but they are treated as such. One of the worst examples is IN Media from Inđija, which has been continuously exposed to all types of attacks, including physical ones, and holds a “record” among local media for the number of SLAPP lawsuits filed against it. The situation is going from bad to worse and increasingly resembles societies such as Lukashenko’s Belarus.*

*In a country where institutions do not function, there is simply no protection that can be guaranteed.”*

Higher ratings were given by editors from areas where protests have not yet reached the level seen in Novi Sad. As one of the reasons for the absence of direct pressure and threats in several smaller communities, interviewees noted that they had known the individuals involved even before their political engagement.

Although not all interviewees had been targeted, the general impression is that, at the very least, it is unpleasant to be a journalist under the current circumstances in Serbia.

*If we are talking about safety, I cannot say the situation is bad in the sense that we are under pressure or that someone attacks us in the street. Logically, I should give a higher rating. At least that is my experience. I do not feel comfortable in the field, but my safety is not endangered.*

*No one cares about journalists’ safety. There are no concrete attacks at the moment, but it is simply unpleasant to be a journalist. To put it plainly, it is unpleasant to be a real journalist in our local government.*

Although she generally does not feel endangered, one interviewee stated that she is uneasy when publishing information that is sensitive for the authorities.

*In general, we have taken significant risks when publishing certain information in recent years. We are the first media outlet in the three municipalities we cover to come forward as a courageous outlet with certain truthful information. We inform the public in a way that has never been done here before. We present critical opinions and facts that the public needs to know, which other media previously did not dare to publish due to fear of pressure. Sometimes I do not feel completely at ease after publishing something; until the end of the*

*day I am not fully relaxed, but I do not feel endangered. Our police are excellent, we have very good cooperation with them, and I feel safe.*

Pressure and threats most often come from the online sphere.

*We mostly receive online threats—literally hundreds of death threats, very explicit, often from accounts representing real people, not bots. There are thousands and thousands of the worst possible chauvinistic insults.*

*Comments are mostly on Facebook. They contain insults that we are not journalists, that we are mercenaries, Ustaše, ‘Dinko’s people’.*

*Over the past ten years, we have received two direct verbal threats, and we reported both cases to the police. One occurred at the height of the scandal involving one of the former mayors, as he was extremely hostile toward our portal, and we assume that he simply gave someone the green light or encouraged them, in relation to a certain article—which was not even authored by our female journalists—to send direct threats saying that they would slaughter us like rabbits. At the time, we reported this to the police, an interview was conducted, and we received no result or outcome, even though we provided all the requested data and IP addresses. The second threat occurred this year via a Facebook profile. It is an active profile, not a bot. The threats were also direct, stating that they would kill both us and our families. We submitted this to the police as well, through our lawyer from the Independent Journalists’ Association of Vojvodina. They contacted us, the Security Information Agency (BIA) also contacted us, and after that we received no further feedback. The only information we received was that it was an active profile and that it would not be any problem to determine who was sending the threats. We interpret this as a direct consequence of the overall atmosphere in society, in which representatives of independent media are generally exposed to continuous attacks.*

*Since January, bot activity on our networks has intensified significantly, particularly on Facebook. Some bots operate under their real names and surnames, but we still consider them bots. Others are fake accounts. This is something we feel as a major pressure on our work. We believe that they want to create pressure on us to give up reporting, to make us start feeling afraid so that we would retreat to the margins and simply wait to see what happens—which, of course, they are in no way succeeding in achieving.*

*As for threats and pressures, we practically receive them on a daily basis, but they remain in the virtual sphere. In most cases, they come through comments on social media or through comments on news articles on our website that are not published. We do not report these, because we would otherwise find ourselves in a situation where we would deal exclusively with that, and it has simply become pointless. On the other hand, we sometimes think that if we were to constantly report them and continuously emphasize them, we would in fact give those who do it even more reason to continue.*

At one point, this media outlet was also the target of a hacker attack.

*On the last day of October and the first day of November, when the canopy collapse occurred in Novi Sad, we experienced hacker attacks on our website. Our website—particularly on the last day of October—was unavailable for a large part of the day, and on the first of November we managed to restore it only for the territory of the former Yugoslavia.*

This is not an isolated case. Another media outlet also experienced an attempted breach of its website.

*On April 6, our website was blocked because someone attempted to access it. For approximately 24 hours we did not have access to the site until our web administrator resolved the issue. We received a message stating that there had been attempts to break our password, so we changed it.*

Due to previous hacker attacks, one of the analyzed portals uses regular backups as a preventive measure.

In certain cases, the safety of journalists was extremely endangered.

*My colleague and I are practically persons with a warrant out for us, and that warrant was issued personally by the regime of Aleksandar Vučić. An intensive campaign has been ongoing for more than a year, which is why we are very unsafe. In the city where we live, we have to be very careful about how we move around, where we go, how we go, and so on.*

Due to the threats they faced, they even had private security.

*We had private security thanks to the European Federation of Journalists. For example, I had a panic button for about four months. It works in such a way that, if someone attacks you, theoretically you press it and the police or security arrive to rescue you. It also functioned in such a way that a vehicle from that private security company would drive around your neighborhood several times a day. But all of this is in fact a kind of heavy improvisation, because your enemy is the state.*

In another media outlet as well, threats moved from the virtual sphere into the physical space.

*Perhaps a little more than a month ago we had a situation in which someone wrote in the toilet of a café, above which our premises are located, that they would throw a bomb at the newsroom. The message was noticed by chance, since the entire toilet is covered in graffiti. We reported it to the police, the police reacted, and the bomb disposal unit came to inspect the premises. We were 99% sure that it was nonsense, but because of that 1%—and because of the safety of the people who not only work here but also spend time in this space—we simply had to report it.*

While reporting from a protest, a man approached a journalist from one of the analyzed media outlets, leaned into her face and told her that their media outlet was to blame for everything happening in society. This case was not reported to the police.

One journalist received threats after asking a question to the president of the municipality.

*In 2023, the president of the municipality attacked our journalist when she asked him about cables that had not been removed after a boy was killed 12 days following a severe storm. Our colleague, who no longer works here, received serious threats. Pressure was exerted on her. However, she nevertheless decided to protect the media outlet. They pressured her to come out publicly and say certain things in order to discredit our media outlet—to say that we do not work professionally and that we have other goals, rather than objective and impartial journalism. She refused to give in to the pressure. The president of the municipality influenced the termination of some of our cooperation contracts and threatened all public companies not to give us statements. This is still ongoing.*

One of the media outlets was targeted by a local politician.

*On two occasions the same local politician spoke about us during a live broadcast, making false claims that we want to become a political actor, that we are in some way organizers of protests, and that the only thing missing is for us to hold a megaphone and a banner. On one of those broadcasts, the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS) reacted, because we sent them the recording of the program to see whether there were grounds for issuing a statement, simply to document it. The next time it was similar, but journalists' associations did not react because it was not as obvious, although when you live in a local community with barely 7–8 thousand inhabitants, you can clearly feel that targeting.*

While reporting from a protest in front of an elementary school in Novi Sad, two elderly people approached a journalist from this portal. One of them leaned into her face, while the other snatched her mobile phone from her hands.

*I mean, the journalists' associations reacted, and they even forwarded a report to the prosecutor's office. I do not know what has happened with that case since.*

A particularly strong message to journalists was the break-in into the premises of the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV).

*There are recordings from surveillance cameras. Their faces can be seen very clearly. The police conducted an investigation, a forensic expert was there as well, and at the time we were told that they would find them that very afternoon. However, many afternoons have passed since then, and of course they never found them. I would say that is because they know where they are, since the regime is the one who ordered it—there is absolutely no doubt about that. Those persons did not take anything from our premises except one Coca-Cola. We read this as a very clear message that we are not safe anywhere.*

Experiences with the police and the prosecutor's office are contradictory.

Based on the previously described experience with the message in the toilet and the physical attack on their interlocutor, he notes that it is obvious that police officers have undergone a

certain type of training and have been sensitized regarding how they should treat journalists or act to protect them.

*I encountered a certain level of understanding. I cannot say support, but in any case the creation of an atmosphere in which you can feel somewhat secure and somewhat relaxed. So it was a different experience compared to that general feeling or prevailing attitude that the system absolutely does not function, especially those parts of the system that concern the judiciary and the prosecution of certain criminal offenses. In this case, the inspectors were genuinely quite correct and receptive.*

Certain cases point to the impunity for attacks against journalists.

*All those threats that we reported ended without any result. Even in the case where it happened by chance that they found someone and put an ankle monitor on him—electronic surveillance—as in the case of a person who openly threatened my colleague and me with murder, he miraculously managed to escape and remove the ankle monitor. The situation is completely clear. It has never been clearer. They want us gone.*

In the case of this interlocutor and his colleague, the Ministry of Interior assessed their security situation.

*When we were exposed to what was practically a lynch campaign, it took them two months to assess our security. After those two months they said that we were safe and that they had determined this based on a multidisciplinary approach and research, and that the document they allegedly produced had hundreds of pages. However, there is a small problem: we have never seen that document. Neither we nor our lawyer.*

In the case of the journalist whose phone was snatched from her hand, the police were present at the event. She approached a police officer to report the incident, but he told her that he did not have a reporting form with him and that there were no grounds for filing a report.

Such a situation clearly shows that the system does not function in accordance with the law, but rather in accordance with the will of individuals who either perform their duties—or fail to perform them—in the way they should.

The situation is different when it comes to the public broadcaster, where the police have been present in the building 24 hours a day for several months, and where journalists are therefore safer in that regard.

## Security Strategy

Most newsrooms do not have clearly defined security strategies. These are generally reduced to informal agreements based on experience.

*We have an alert strategy, primarily aimed at informing both the domestic and international public. Unfortunately, we are capable of informing the entire world within ten minutes. I say 'unfortunately' because we developed this based on experience. As is usually the case with media and journalists, the strategy is always the public. Since we work in the public interest, the public should be our ally, because we are in fact protecting the public interest.*

*I did not sign any such document when I was employed. I don't think such a thing exists. I am certain that we do not have private security accompanying staff in the field. So, it's a driver, a cameraman, possibly a sound technician, and a journalist—a standard reporting crew. They certainly know how to assess when to withdraw and where to draw the line so that the journalist does not become the news. I believe people are aware of this and adhere to it, because no member of our team has been attacked so far.*

One newsroom does have written rules. These include contact points in case of potential attacks and procedures for reporting them.

One newsroom has developed a strategy in the form of a document in cooperation with the Association of Online Media, which is expected to be adopted soon. Another newsroom is currently in the process of drafting a protocol.

In addition to strategies, some newsrooms have taken concrete steps, such as installing video surveillance and additional security at newsroom entrances.

Our interviewees are not equally informed about journalist safety trainings. Some state that such trainings existed in the past and that their journalists attended them, but that they have not been available recently. Others say they have received invitations and that their journalists will attend in the near future. When they learn about such trainings, media outlets generally register their journalists and grant them time off to attend. What matters to them is that these trainings offer new knowledge, rather than insights they have already gained through their work. In very small newsrooms, absence due to training would negatively affect operations.

*We have not responded to any invitations so far because I believe I can assess situations better based on experience than any formal training could. Of course, there is also the lack of time, since we are a small newsroom. We cannot afford the luxury of attending seminars, because the work would suffer. That is one of the reasons. I am not opposed in principle, but time is a key factor.*

At the public broadcaster, journalist safety training is also available through trade unions. Many employees are members of journalists' associations and receive information about such trainings through these associations, which they also attend.

Current developments are such that any protest can turn into a crisis situation. Since journalists from all the newsrooms we spoke with have reported on protests, it can be said that, to a greater or lesser extent, they have reported from crisis situations, particularly those in Novi Sad.

*The newsroom here is young, or relatively young, but already has considerable experience—especially since working in a media outlet for the past ten years means you have covered numerous protests. The general advice is always not to expose oneself to danger. When protests occurred where there was a possibility of attacks or tear gas being used, we procured gas masks for journalists as a form of protection. The guiding principle is that there is a line which should not be crossed—one should not do anything that directly endangers personal safety or unnecessarily increase risk.*

The practice among the media outlets participating in the research is not to send inexperienced journalists to such events. Often, editors themselves take on reporting on sensitive topics and in crisis situations.

*We will never send inexperienced or young journalists to high-risk gatherings, and as we can see, all gatherings in Serbia are high-risk. If a young journalist does go, since we cooperate with media studies students, they will always be accompanied by a senior journalist who will not lose sight of them and will train them on-site. That is the best way to gain such experience—but never recklessly.*

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Journalists who studied media in Novi Sad had courses on reporting in crisis situations as part of their education. In one newsroom, journalists learned about this through informal education and various trainings. However, rules of conduct largely come down to what they have learned through experience.

There is a need for training in reporting from crisis situations, but such training is either unavailable or interviewees are unaware of its existence.

*I am certain that such training has never existed, nor is it planned. I believe many journalists are not sufficiently trained even for working in news programming on the main television channel. That is important to emphasize, because other programs operate very professionally. This primarily refers to minority-language newsrooms. However, minority newsrooms usually operate in communities where those minorities live, where people know them personally, and the topics they cover are not particularly sensitive. But since recent developments, they too have had to report from events, especially radio journalists who need to capture the atmosphere and often go into more problematic situations. Still, no one has reported such problems to me, and I believe minority newsrooms have not had this kind of*

*training either.*

*We do not have workshops on reporting in crisis situations. At this moment, that would be extremely useful—even just a one-day online session. We don't have time to spend three days somewhere; give me four hours with key knowledge and practical advice on how to react.*

As a form of protection, in some newsrooms journalists are required to wear press vests or identification while covering protests. However, certain media outlets avoid wearing identifying marks in such situations. There have even been recommendations that if there is no police presence at a gathering, journalists should not wear press vests in order to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

*What we have introduced since the protests began is that journalists must wear visibly displayed identification. We noticed that people at protests check the ID and then do not cause problems.*

Although they recognize the importance of establishing rules, the volume of work prevents newsrooms from addressing security issues more systematically, whether physical or cyber security.

*I cannot say that we consistently follow recommendations in practice, simply because there are very few of us, and such issues are at the bottom of the agenda. We deal with cyber security only when a problem arises.*

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## Cooperation with Journalists' Associations

The media outlets we interviewed have well-developed cooperation with journalists' associations and organizations that, among other things, deal with journalist safety.

Almost all media analyzed for this report cooperate with the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV) and the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS).

Other associations and organizations mentioned by interviewees include the Media Freedom Coalition, the Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM), the Journalists' Association of Serbia (UNS), the Association of Online Media (AOM), and Local Press.

*We equally respect the three umbrella associations—NUNS, UNS, and NDNV—and whenever we need assistance, we turn to all of them. Experience has shown that we receive help or at least an offer of assistance from all of them.*

*As part of a project, the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina established a network of local coordinators in Subotica and Bačka Topola. When journalists encounter*

problems, they contact them to report any pressure, attacks, or threats. Several public discussions were held in both cities within the project, involving representatives of the police and prosecution, focusing on contact points.

*I believe that the more people, institutions, and organizations are informed about what is happening, the better—because every small incident should be recorded, as small things grow into larger ones.*

One interviewee pointed out problems with registration in the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM):

*They constantly ignore us—we have not been able to register with REM at all. Although we have existed since 2016, they keep saying something is missing, while portals and media outlets that have existed for only a year are already registered.*

Several media outlets also cooperate with international organizations such as the European Federation of Journalists, Article 19, the Committee to Protect Journalists (New York), Free Press Unlimited, Amnesty International, and Media Freedom Rapid Response.

### Cooperation with Institutions and Access to Information

Based on interviews, it is evident that cooperation with institutions is lacking, especially at the local level.

*In all normal democracies, if you cover politics, it is standard to communicate with politicians and have their phone numbers. It is—or should be—in their interest. However, as we know, the Serbian Progressive Party and its affiliates have orders not to communicate with us or appear on independent media, so we are left relying on the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance.*

*Our communication with decision-makers is minimal. We maintain regular contact only with cultural institutions. With the city administration—zero. We constantly send emails but receive no response. We have not yet submitted formal requests for access to information. Since I work for a public broadcaster, I sometimes obtain information through other channels.*

*The local government responded to us for the first time in about a year, and only because of a major issue—deforestation. Otherwise, neither local authorities nor public utility companies respond, let alone provincial or national institutions. The only communication is through the Commissioner.*

However, even the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance cannot guarantee access to information.

*Even when the Commissioner sends a request, institutions—especially in sensitive*

cases—prefer to pay fines rather than provide documents.

*We requested information from the Institute for Emergency Medical Services in Novi Sad regarding the actions of emergency services on the night when students were beaten, after being attacked by individuals who came out of the premises of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which later led to the fall of the government and the replacement of the mayor. Specifically, we requested official information on when the emergency service received the call, when they responded, how they proceeded, what their assessment of the priority level was, and similar details. Instead of a response to that request, we received a complaint filed with the Press Council regarding an earlier news item we had published claiming that an ambulance had run over a dog, which indeed turned out to be incorrect. There was an error, but it was unintentional. The Press Council decided that we had not violated the Code of Ethics, which is important. In any case, they did not respond at all to our Request for Access to Information of Public Importance. We filed an appeal with the Commissioner. The Commissioner contacted the institution. Although at the time the Commissioner sent the request the proceedings before the Press Council had already been completed, the director of the Institute replied that, until the proceedings were concluded, he would not have anything to do with the yellow press. The Commissioner informed him that there was no legal basis for such a claim. We are still waiting for the answers.*

A key issue is that the Commissioner cannot compel institutions to provide information that is not formally documented.

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*I heard that, at the invitation of the City of Belgrade, an Austrian delegation from one of their proto-fascist parties was coming. That became the topic of my article. I contacted Beoinfo, but I received no response. I filed a complaint with the Commissioner, and the Commissioner told me that there was no official documentation in this case on the basis of which they could issue an order to the institution. Since the legal regulations have been tightened, it is no longer possible to obtain answers to questions, but only specific documents. Answers to questions are no longer considered information of public importance. After that, I said that I would no longer even submit requests for access to information of public importance.*

One interviewee noted that the Commissioner has recently started finding faults in their requests, even when using standard templates.

*This had never happened to us before. These are requests that we use as a template. We adjusted long ago whom we address them to. I thought that, if it happened to me for the first time, I must have made a mistake—so fine, we move on. But a few weeks later a colleague told me that her request had also been returned because of some error that she could neither see nor understand. It seems as if the Commissioner has changed the way these requests and complaints are handled. I don't know why, but it is symptomatic. As the protests began to grow, this started happening to us.*

Access to information is somewhat easier in institutions that have designated information officers, though it still depends on the sensitivity of the information.

*For example, the Government of Vojvodina and all its secretariats have always responded very regularly and diligently, and within the legally prescribed deadlines, to all the questions I sent them. However, we can agree that there is a much smaller concentration of money in Vojvodina than in Belgrade, and that information concerning the spending of money in Vojvodina is therefore neither as important nor as significant.*

Independent media are often ignored to the extent that they are not invited to events or sent official statements.

*In the past period—specifically since November 1—there have been no invitations to events. Our newsroom did not receive invitations to official events attended by the former mayor, and we have not really seen any indication that this practice has changed with the new mayor either. In practice, this represents a form of avoidance. We have been reduced to asking questions when the City Assembly holds its sessions, and even then you have to be lucky for the mayor to actually attend the session. Previously, the situation was that they did not respond to the questions we sent, so we would try to catch them at events and press conferences.*

In the case of a media outlet whose journalist received threats after asking a question to the president of a municipality, the municipality stopped sending them press releases and inviting them to events. They were denied access to information.

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*This is still ongoing, although it has decreased significantly. Some time has passed and people have realized that we are not foreign mercenaries, as independent media are often labeled today, and that we have good intentions, so essentially we continue to function. We attended events because people from various institutions would inform us about them. Over the past few months this has eased somewhat, and when they give statements to everyone, they give them to us as well—but they do not give statements to us directly. We manage on our own: we write, we submit requests for access to information of public importance, we send emails and make phone calls, but obtaining information is more difficult for us. They eventually put us back on the mailing lists after we said we would sue them.*

According to one of our interlocutors, whether they receive information depends on the person heading a particular institution. This is also illustrated by the example of a media outlet that was on a “blacklist” until the mayor was replaced, even though the new mayor also belongs to the Serbian Progressive Party.

*During the term of that former mayor, we were on the blacklist, excluded from any notifications. Communication was not zero—it was minus one hundred. But we overcame that period once he was replaced and a new mayor was appointed. Little by little, we somehow managed to build mutual trust, so I cannot complain: we do receive information.*

*However unpleasant it may be for the local government, over the past two and a half years I cannot say that any information has been withheld from us.*

Silence from authorities leads to independent media being perceived as opposition or as promoters of protests.

*It is very difficult to remain objective when the authorities remain silent while others are louder than ever. I always contact them, but they ignore me. They issue no statements and do not respond to criticism. As a result, we end up reporting only on protests. I have even started writing articles with a personal tone, which I never did before, just to show that we try to present both sides.*

### Political Pressures

Due to their reporting, one of our interlocutors faced a serious campaign against them. However, others state that their media outlets have generally not encountered major problems.

*We haven't had that kind of direct attacks on our outlet in the sense that representatives of the authorities would openly target us. There were, in the past, lower-ranking officials—directors or deputy directors of public enterprises—who called us a 'Ustaša portal.'*

One interviewee notes that there have been no pressures in the past year, but that in earlier periods they experienced various forms of pressure from the authorities. According to them, only physical violence was avoided, while all other forms of pressure were present—even extending beyond journalism. For example, a football club connected to the interviewee was expelled from its stadium and forced to play in a neighboring municipality. In terms of journalistic work, they were removed from a press conference attended by a minister.

*When the mayor, the minister, and the speaker of the assembly saw me, the conference was interrupted. Security came, grabbed me by the lapels, and threw me out in front of about 15 colleagues and the chief of staff, who used to work with me on the radio.*

Another interviewee reported that a member of the municipal council for information told them that everything they publish is being compiled into a file.

*Two years ago, when the results of the local media co-financing competition were announced, pro-government outlets received substantial funding, while we always get symbolic amounts. We made a screenshot of some results, which they didn't like. I see that as pressure—why would you keep a file on us?"*

There were also cases where journalists received messages through intermediaries.

*There were 'subtle' messages coming from third parties. Someone would call and say*

*they had spoken to someone else, and that I should ‘calm down’ since I’m young—why do I need this? That was a frequent message I received.*

The situation was different when the Serbian Progressive Party was in opposition.

*The last opposition we seriously worked with was SNS around 2010. Back then, they used our outlet to promote their ideas and were very cooperative. That ended once they came to power.*

Political pressure does not come only from ruling parties but also from the opposition.

*National chauvinists have a very specific opinion about me because I deal with so-called taboo topics. In other words, I deal with the criticism of nationalism, militant nationalism, clerical nationalism, and all the taboos that exist in this society. Of course, they are most numerous within the ranks of the ruling regime, primarily within the Serbian Progressive Party, but also among these right-wing groups. Across that horizon of the right—although I would not call it the right, but rather a front of chauvinists in politics—they all hate me without exception; the differences are only a matter of nuance, and they very often comment on my work and persona in a very negative way.*

*The opposition also perceives us as an opposition media outlet and as if we are obliged to publish everything they write, so nowadays there are plenty of calls from their side as well. Previously, the question was why we had changed a headline. We simply edit press releases. Recently, especially since these protests began, the press releases have been extremely poor. It is obvious that they do not even know which institution they are criticizing; competences are mixed up, there is misinformation... They put us in a position where we have to distance ourselves if we publish something, which we never had to do before. In the end, it turns out that the statement needs to be completely rewritten to resemble something coherent. Lately we have not been publishing press releases at all, because we have taken the position that we publish them only if there is something concrete and useful in them, rather than just insults.*

*The president of the city board of Dveri keeps calling us and asking why we do not publish their press releases, and then accuses us of censorship. Our position is simply that we do not give space to right-wing organizations. The moment when their representatives were targeted by the local board of the Serbian Progressive Party, we did cover that, because regardless of how right-wing they are, no one should be treated that way. However, we simply do not publish their propaganda.*

In public broadcasting, according to one interviewee, censorship comes from editors on channel 1, alongside strong self-censorship among journalists.

*Have politicians called? Well, you can see it in the case of RTS, just as in the case of RTV. Whenever there is even slightly objective reporting about something, they immediately call to say that it is not objective, because for them the only thing that is objective is what is*

theirs.

All interviewees agree that there is evident control over the media by the ruling structures.

*Every populist considers it extremely important to control the media. It is equally important for them to portray the media as liars. Because if you lie every day, people will eventually reach a point—as many already have—where they no longer believe anyone about anything. We can see this even in the United States; this is also part of Donald Trump’s political approach, to discredit the media in every possible way, because the aim is to eliminate a very strong watchdog of power and open up a cleared space for the complete usurpation of society. The judiciary has been captured, the parliament has been turned into a circus. Independent regulatory bodies are largely completely dysfunctional, so journalists in fact represent the missing piece that still prevents that field from being entirely cleared and overrun exclusively by weeds.*

*Officially, I have no proof of this, but based on experience I can say that control over certain media outlets absolutely exists. It is well known which local media are welcome at press conferences, which ones receive information and which ones do not. There may be nothing that could formally prove such a claim, but from experience I can say that if only one or a few media outlets appear at an event while others are absent, then there is clearly a pattern—and it keeps repeating.*

*There is an open form of control, the kind everyone knows about. In my opinion, there are also hidden forms of control that we can only speculate about. There are media outlets that pretend to be independent but in fact have deals with those in power. This cannot be proven, but experience and good instinct have not deceived us so far, and they will not deceive us now either.*

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The main mechanism of media control is money.

*As long as a media outlet satisfies their needs, they can finance it—and they do so openly.*

*Several years ago, the owner of one portal told us that it had been openly stated to them that in all media outlets that had received funding from the local self-government, the opposition does not exist. To this day, those portals still do not publish statements issued by opposition parties.*

Control is present to such an extent that media outlets under government influence will not report on anything in any way connected with protests, even if it is merely a service-type piece of information, such as which streets are closed due to the protests.

*For the first month, the protests effectively did not exist in this city as far as all media financed by taxpayers’ money were concerned. Some reports do appear now, but the question remains to what extent they are actually based on facts.*

In one local self-government, according to our interlocutor, media control is connected to the section of the mayor's office responsible for media affairs.

*One of the media strategists of the Serbian Progressive Party here is the deputy director of a public utility company, who simultaneously developed a career in managing local media. I believe he runs a fairly extensive network across the West Bačka District. They are the ones buying media outlets, they are the ones shaping editorial policy. What is interesting here is that it all seems to have originated somewhere with Kurir, I think around 2018–2019, or perhaps even 2020. They created a system through which this narrative continues to be pushed even today. People who work for local media simultaneously work in the media section of the mayor's office. They run the media and they are the ones distributing information.*

Among our interlocutors were those who had experienced attempts at political pressure on their media outlets' editorial policies. Some of them received offers to sell their outlets, whether directly or through intermediaries.

*Back in 2016 we received serious offers to declare ourselves as "their" media outlet and to accept the authority of the municipal president. We refused. Substantial sums of money were involved.*

One of the methods of influence is intimidation.

*These are very clear and direct attempts to influence editorial policy when you are shamelessly dragged through the mud because of what you write about. What they actually expect is that you will become afraid and begin to censor yourself. This is the principal method used by the current authorities, and it has succeeded in a large part of the media landscape. I cannot say the exact percentage, but certainly more than 90 percent of media outlets in Serbia are essentially propaganda tools. There is no journalism in them.*

None of the interlocutors we spoke with yielded to such pressures.

*In my work I have never allowed myself to skip certain topics, stories, or discussions about events around us that should either be reported on or deliberately not reported on. As the editor at the central desk, it was never a problem for me to send a journalist to cover an event that emerged unexpectedly at that very moment, even if it had not been planned, provided that I believed it deserved sufficient journalistic attention. Later it was up to the editor responsible for the programme to decide whether it would be broadcast or not. My responsibility was to ensure the coverage, because the editor at the central desk does not work only for the first television channel but for all seven media outlets. As a result, it often happened that events I had assigned a journalist to cover appeared in some other media outlets rather than on the television's main programme.*

*At the local level, and also across Vojvodina, it is very well known who the founder of our newsroom is and what they stand for. I also have my own journalistic history. When I was*

*younger and served as editor-in-chief of a weekly newspaper, there were attempts to exert influence in various ways even then. However, the public—including the political public—very clearly understood what kind of journalist I was, and that there was no chance of success. Above my head it says “public interest,” and that is that. They already know very well that if even the slightest thing happens—if someone tries to exert pressure or says something in a radio programme—we immediately inform the public about it. They know that representatives of journalists’ associations often come to visit us and that we hold panel discussions. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe comes here once a year. Before this media outlet even existed, when I was working as a journalist, a man who at the time held public office threatened both me and my mother. That was eight or nine years ago. I got into my car and went straight to the police to report it. And the news spread—we are a small community. I will use every mechanism I have to make it known and to protect myself. If the police or anyone else wants to protect me, that is fine, but I will also say publicly what is happening so that people know.*

### SLAPP Lawsuits

SLAPP lawsuits are used to economically exhaust media outlets and may lead to their closure.

Among the analyzed media, four encountered such lawsuits—three successfully defended themselves, while one ended in an out-of-court settlement.

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*If we define a SLAPP lawsuit as anything involving an amount of 50,000 or more—if that is one of the definitions—then yes, we had one lawsuit concerning an article we republished that contained the judge’s closing remarks. In other words, it was a report from a trial. The defendant was not present but submitted medical documentation; during the hearing the judge publicly explained the reasons for the absence, and this was interpreted by that party as a violation of privacy and an unlawful disclosure of medical records, since the reason was medical in nature. Because of that, we were sued—both the media outlet and myself as the editor. The case was eventually settled out of court.*

*While writing an article for the Independent Journalists’ Association of Vojvodina, I came to the conclusion that it had been a SLAPP lawsuit. Three misdemeanor proceedings were initiated against me and a colleague at the time because of our participation in protests against lithium mining. Both of us were accused, along with a local activist, of being organizers. In two cases that continued further, I was charged with blocking traffic. We were acquitted on all counts. For example, we proposed opposition leaders as witnesses, and they came and testified that we had not been the organizers.*

In this case, legal assistance was provided by Civic Initiatives.

Our interlocutor points out that the police filmed them during the aforementioned protest, even when they sat down in a hospitality venue.

Based on the conversation, we conclude that the interlocutors are very aware of the consequences that such lawsuits may have, and therefore take great care with every piece of information they publish. In some of these media outlets, fact-checking is mandatory.

*We have a fairly effective mechanism for preventing SLAPP lawsuits. We call it legal fact-checking. Every text we publish is reviewed by our lawyer, who has worked with us journalists for a long time and understands how the journalistic mind works. He draws our attention to potential pitfalls in the texts and intervenes where necessary, and we as editors usually follow his advice. Anyone who can engage a lawyer or a media law expert for such matters will certainly face fewer SLAPP lawsuits.*

*No matter how unlikely it may seem that we will receive a response, we always call and ask for the other side's statement, especially when it concerns allegations. We also protect ourselves by keeping records of all those calls and messages—Viber, SMS, email—absolutely everything. At the end of the article we always state that we contacted the other party for comment but that they did not respond. When we work on a topic, particularly when money is involved, we always consult a lawyer to review the text and say whether something can or cannot be published.*

*Having learned from the experiences of others, when we deal with highly sensitive topics, the three of us read the text. In this way we try to prevent any opportunity for such situations to occur, because it would destroy us.*

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## Financing and Operations of Media

The main challenge for most media outlets is financing.

*At this moment, the biggest challenges are that donor funding has been withdrawn and that it remains uncertain how the market will react to everything that has been happening in Serbia over the past several months.*

Limited finances also entail limited resources.

*We have many ideas, but not the capacity to implement all of them. We try to be as rational as possible in the use of our resources. At the moment, our social media presence is suffering as a result, as we have almost completely neglected it. Previously we had another journalist who has since started working for N1, so we can no longer rely on her. She was responsible for ensuring our presence on social media, primarily on Instagram and TikTok. As a result, we now publish content there only sporadically.*

## Project-based funding

The main source of funding for the media outlets we spoke with is project-based financing.

When it comes to co-financing media content of public interest, some media outlets have withdrawn from local, provincial, or national calls for proposals, as their projects are rejected or the funds awarded to them are significantly reduced, while media outlets considered favorable to the authorities receive exceptionally large sums.

*We have not applied at the local level for a long time, because I cannot read every year that our budget is “overestimated” when we are asking for 200,000 dinars. Last year the Province and the Ministry gave us zero funds. Our scores were disastrous, as if we had never written a project before. Almost two weeks before the results of those calls were published, I actually received a tip from an insider that our project would not pass because I was on some kind of list. This year we registered in the JIS, but we did not submit a project or even try. My decision was immediately that I would not apply this year; my only goal was to register, to be present there, to appear in the system as registered, and then we will see what we will do next year.*

However, there are media outlets that do not avoid these calls.

*We have always applied at all three levels—local, provincial, and national. I can say that we have received some funding at all three levels. Those funds have never been what we actually requested in order to implement all project activities. What is important for us is that for all the calls we applied to, the projects were mostly written by journalists, and they were first and foremost written well and then implemented well. In that sense, in a sea of various projects that are pure nonsense, here there was something of quality for which citizens, above all, provided the money.*

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Even among those who apply to these calls, experiences differ. While some are most satisfied with the process at the national level, others have never received funding at the national level.

*We perceive the Province as one of the worst “municipalities” that exist. I think there is less rigging in municipalities than at the provincial level. I think the results in the Province are already known even for 2028.*

*Every year we apply to the city administration for funding. Every year the commission allocates funds—sometimes significant, sometimes minimal. One year it happened that the commission awarded us funds, but that money was never transferred to our account. That can be understood as a form of pressure.*

Our interlocutors agree that the transparency of these calls is high, especially at the national level, but the quality of the projects that are approved, the relevance of the media outlets receiving the funding, and the actual results of the projects are questionable.

*One thing is formal transparency, and another is whether the entire system is healthy at all. If you look at it formally, all the criteria are respected, but it all makes no sense. Just by reading the explanations of who received money and why, in the vast majority of cases you can see that it has nothing to do with a project, because it is clear what a project is. When you write one, it means dealing with a specific topic, with a defined goal and specific results that must be justified. Informing citizens about the work of the local self-government cannot be a project.*

*It is very painful when people who genuinely do their jobs well are rejected by institutions when it comes to funding. Bot accounts, which are numerous here, constantly say that we will not receive a single dinar. Like any person on the planet, we want to be able to live from our work. Funds should be distributed according to proper criteria: the level of trust citizens have in a media outlet, the quality of its work and reporting, the quality of video reports and video editorial work, and the quality of journalists and authored texts. The quantity of original content on a media outlet is also important. This hurts us deeply.*

*A very important factor that is not evaluated anywhere is previous work. Not everyone is equally credible. You can register a portal for 1,000 dinars. The Ministry of Information and Telecommunications of Serbia has never visited those media outlets, and in my opinion that is a major shortcoming. In our view, our portal cannot be ranked equally with one founded last September that simply has a name.*

The composition of the selection committees is particularly problematic.

*At the local level, every time I see who sits on the commission, I ask myself who these people are. They are mostly anonymous individuals who do not exist in the world of journalism.*

*If we are talking about municipalities and cities that announce these calls, what shocked me is that I heard there are a certain number of municipalities that have never conducted these calls, even though they were obliged to do so. Another thing that shocked me is that people sit on these commissions whom I would not trust to look after my child for five minutes, let alone decide on the distribution of money from a local government. A third thing that bothers me is that in certain cities some media outlets receive very large amounts of funding almost every year, which gives the impression that this serves as regular financing rather than project financing. I am also bothered by the fact that Informer and similar tabloids receive funding from almost every local self-government.*

*The fundamental problem with project-based financing from the very beginning has been the work of the commissions and some general patterns in the interpretation of criteria. I do not believe the results reflect the real quality of the projects. Another issue is that there is no appeal period. The only thing you can do is initiate administrative proceedings before a court. That is a procedure that can last a very long time and essentially means nothing. Even if the*

*call were annulled, you cannot restore a call from five years ago if the process itself lasts five years. We will see whether the unified information system and a different scoring system will bring something new. What is also negative is that many city administrations have reduced funding to 10% of the budget.*

As one of the interlocutors explained, since last year in certain local self-governments a practice has been introduced whereby a certain portion of funds is allocated through calls for proposals, while the remainder is contracted through small-value public procurements.

*This is now a new situation. Out of all municipalities in Serbia, ours are among the first two. According to the budget, 10–11 million dinars are allocated for information services. Then they announce project co-financing worth one million, while the remaining 10 million is later contracted through small-value procurements, even though the Ministry sent them a letter clearly stating that this is not legally permissible.*

Some media outlets are oriented toward international projects.

*We focus more on international donors and international grants because the funds can be more substantial, and donors also recognize us as a reliable and responsible partner.*

What represents a problem here is the suspension of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) projects.

*Donald Trump's blow to USAID is a direct blow to the foundations of civil society, which is ultimately their goal. We are one piece in that mosaic of the global crisis affecting both the media and civil society organizations, as well as states, given that USAID has been a major infrastructure donor. Although we are not currently beneficiaries of USAID funds, this has produced a domino effect: other donors are now trying—but cannot fully compensate—to redistribute the funds they have in order to fill the many gaps that have opened up.*

With the suspension of USAID funding, cooperation with IREX has also ended, which had existed in several media outlets in previous years.

Several media outlets cited European Endowment for Democracy and its projects as significant support.

Other donors with whom certain media outlets have cooperated include the British Council, i.e. the Government of the United Kingdom, as well as National Endowment for Democracy and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit.

Due to the volume of work, some media outlets are often unable to follow international media calls and therefore focus on only one larger project or finance themselves in other ways.

*We have not applied to any calls abroad. We have seen them, but we simply have such a dispersed yet functional and effective advertising system that it is a luxury for us to set aside time to write projects. We work a lot. Personally, I work every day and I am very tired. It would be good if we applied, but we have not.*

## Advertising

For most of the analyzed media outlets, marketing does not represent a significant source of funding but rather an occasional additional income.

One of the reasons is that there is no person dedicated exclusively to marketing.

*We have some activities, but due to limited resources we do not really deal with it. There should be one person who would create offers, send them out, and make sure we remain visible to potential clients. When someone asks us a question, I sometimes do not even understand what they are asking—I do not even know what a rotating banner is. This year we plan at least to define banner positions and publicly publish a price list. At the moment we do it rather amateurishly. Someone sends us a banner, we place it on the homepage, and we charge for that type of content. We try to remain competitive compared to other media outlets.*

In addition, there are challenges such as the lack of an advertising culture among companies themselves, as well as an underdeveloped economy.

What is particularly surprising is that advertising is not at the expected level even at the public service broadcaster.

*It is financed through advertising to the extent that it earns around 40 million dinars annually in total. It has 1,200 employees, while 200 million dinars are needed just for monthly salaries. That means that in an entire year they secure only a quarter of the funds required for one month's salaries. I have always wondered what the purpose of that marketing is.*

In two of the analyzed media outlets, advertising represents the main source of income.

*We have a portal and a radio station. Some advertisers go for the radio, some for the portal, and some combine both. Although we are a media outlet that has outgrown the local level, we do not have large national companies advertising with us, even though they might have an interest if campaigns were targeted at Novi Sad or a broader area. Most of our advertisers are actually small or medium-sized enterprises, generally of a local character. A small portion comes through agencies, but those are mostly individual PR texts published on the website, and that is it.*

*I manage the entire marketing sector through which we finance ourselves. I create advertisements, organize sales representatives, and help increase sales for companies. In essence, I truly help them increase their sales in various ways, from designing marketing strategies to full implementation, both through their own channels and through our media outlets. We also have billboards. That is our model of financing. We devised it back in 2017. Others have tried both to steal and to copy the idea. It is working well for us—people trust us and they achieve results.*

In one newsroom, marketing is still under development.

*Within one project implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, we began developing it in a fairly solid way and laid the foundations for marketing, though not typical advertising such as banners, since we are aware that this would not work well in our environment. Instead, we focused more on native advertising. We had a few clients and it started off well. We did not even want too many clients because we did not want to turn into that kind of media outlet.*

Political pressures are also visible through advertising, demonstrating how the authorities can exert economic influence over the media.

*Advertisers who are otherwise reasonable people often do not want—or do not dare—to advertise in independent media, frequently because they fear that the authorities might send some kind of financial, tax, or other inspection against them.*

*There were situations where, after we published a story, one of our advertisers immediately withdrew. There were also cases where someone with a local business who advertised with us attended an event or a lunch where a member of the Serbian Progressive Party was present and reproached them for advertising with us.*

### Other Revenue Sources

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In addition to project-based funding and advertising, some media outlets have found additional ways to generate income.

*We have developed our video production services quite well, particularly for social media, for the needs of various NGO organizations, for the visibility of their projects, and similar purposes. Another pillar is organizing various workshops and journalism training sessions.*

Two newsrooms also conducted crowdfunding campaigns, but this requires raising public awareness about the value of truthful and verified information and investigative reporting. Like advertising, it also requires time.

*We have had several crowdfunding campaigns. Our experience is that people react only when you are in a crisis. In other words, if you have a court ruling that is clearly unjust, you can ask for support and receive that money. But it is only temporary. It lasts seven, ten, fifteen days. Then you try to educate people that if they want timely, objective, analytical, and investigative stories, someone has to pay for that. But it is very difficult to build that kind of awareness.*

*We carried out three one-off crowdfunding campaigns because of a lack of resources. When we do that, for two weeks we do nothing else. And all of them were successful. Every*

*time we set a goal—if earlier it was, say, 100,000 dinars—we would reach 200,000 to 250,000. If the goal was 250,000, we would reach 400,000. But all of that is still work.*

### Journalistic staff

In most of the analyzed newsrooms, women make up the majority of employees. With the exception of the public service broadcaster and one media outlet that has grown beyond the local level, these are newsrooms with no more than five or six employees. Many rely on freelance contributors and also cooperate with retired journalists.

When it comes to journalists' salaries, the interlocutors unanimously agree that they are modest and insufficient for a decent standard of living. Journalists are very often forced to find additional work in order to earn extra income. Even at the public service broadcaster, as we learned in the interviews, there are employees whose earnings are below the minimum wage.

*Anyone who thinks that working at a public service broadcaster is comfortable is seriously mistaken. The only ones who are doing well there are those who are close to the fire.*

Regarding the public service broadcaster, one of our interlocutors points out the issue of purchasing independent productions.

*Although by all standards there are more employees in that institution than would be optimally required, a large portion of them work in administration, while there is a shortage of people in some programming segments—that is, people who actually produce content. For example, we do not have cultural programmes; we only have a cultural news bulletin. The documentary programme has no budget, so you can only film in Novi Sad and the immediate surroundings. There is no budget at all for reporting from more distant locations. The programme on the first television channel has been crippled to that extent, while independent productions are being purchased. Funds are not given to the staff, but are instead used to buy content that is not originally produced by us.*

Given the level of salaries, some media outlets try to compensate employees in other ways—for example by enabling informal education through various training sessions and workshops, which may even include travel abroad.

The trade union at the public service broadcaster is currently negotiating a new collective agreement in which night work will be given special recognition.

*The Law on Occupational Safety and Health was partially amended last year or the year before, and night work has already been classified as a high-risk category, because it has been proven that working at night significantly endangers the human body. From now on, night work will be compensated not at 26 percent but at 35 percent. That covers eight*

*night hours, which is not a negligible amount when it adds up.*

Interlocutors agree that there is a challenge in hiring new staff. On the one hand, it is difficult to find them; on the other, as one interlocutor notes, the challenge is that they cannot offer salaries that would represent real financial compensation.

*The biggest problem is that times have changed. You cannot really expect someone to come and volunteer anymore. Young people's expectations about what their starting position should be have changed, particularly in financial terms. You can consider it something like hitting the jackpot when you encounter people who are willing to see their beginnings as a form of learning and who are aware that they have come to a decent place and then gradually begin earning a salary that grows over time.*

*We tried to establish cooperation with a secondary school. We opened our doors to them, gave them access to our equipment. We even created an intro sequence for a video show for them. We wanted to start with a section and then perhaps develop it further. We did not expect them to pursue it professionally, but we hoped someone might become interested and perhaps later, while studying, occasionally earn something from it. The level of interest was minus ten. Then you realize it would be a waste of finances, energy, and time—both ours and theirs—without achieving anything.*

One interlocutor also notes that there are interested individuals, but the problem arises when they have to sign a text with their own name.

Since Novi Sad is a university city, the journalistic staff there are mostly university-educated. In smaller communities, newsrooms have difficulty finding trained journalists. Those who complete journalism studies often remain in university cities, and even if they return, they frequently do not want to work in their profession.

On the other hand, educated staff are not always considered suitable.

*Until around 2016 we had a very good practice: every year about ten to fifteen new people from journalism studies would come to us. I am referring to the entire institution, because we also have minority-language newsrooms, and everyone benefited from it. Then the authorities changed, and that created a problem for us because educated media professionals were no longer so welcome, since they are not obedient by nature. The other negative development that affected us was the hiring freeze, which we continue to suffer from to a large extent to this day.*

Media outlets that report in the languages of national minorities need someone who has an excellent command of that language, which is difficult to find in a small community.

Another challenge is the low level of media literacy, even among those who want to work as journalists.

*Media literacy is generally at a low level, and as a result people are not even properly*

*equipped to read news, let alone write it or cover topics professionally.*

Although not all media outlets have the resources to train new staff, younger colleagues are trained practically, through work itself, by sharing experience.

*We have the resources to provide training if they are willing to learn, but unfortunately my experience has been very negative. We do not have the time to repeat something three times and correct the same mistake three times. The elimination system is very harsh. Quite simply, we do not want to waste time if we assess from the start that someone is not worth the effort.*

Two interlocutors highlighted as particularly valuable the Digital Journalism School of the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation, where they have sent young journalists from their newsrooms for training. One newsroom also cooperates with the Foundation in organizing summer internships.

### **Assessment of the Media Landscape in Vojvodina**

The average score that our interlocutors gave to media pluralism in their local communities is two (on a five-point scale).

Almost none of the interlocutors were able to list more than four independent media outlets in their local environment that contribute to media pluralism. Nevertheless, as one interlocutor notes, the influence of small independent local newsrooms increased precisely during the period of the protests, as evidenced by the remarkable growth in their readership.

One of the problems highlighted by our interlocutor is the deep provincialization of the media, particularly the public service broadcaster. According to him, the situation is almost identical in minority-language media.

Another interlocutor points out that the problem is not only the large number of pro-government media outlets, but also the fact that pluralism does not exist even within individual media outlets.

Pluralism is also lacking at the public service broadcaster.

*The public service broadcaster cannot really boast about the existence of pluralism of opinions, because if it does not exist on the first channel—which is the most important segment of this television network—then we all suffer. We are all hostages of the first television channel and of a certain number of people who impose that political narrative on us, something that should never apply to the media.*

According to another interlocutor, what is crucial for the survival of independent media is that the media sector fight for an independent Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media and ensure respect for the decisions of the Press Council.

*There must be respect for the Code. There must be respect for the Press Council. These are the bodies we must strengthen. We must fight for the REM. These are the issues we must insist on. This is our last chance to achieve something; otherwise, the rest of us will not exist either.*

Solidarity among colleagues in some communities is at a very high level, particularly in Novi Sad.

*The Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina awarded its annual prize to a group of journalists who, when all this chaos began, organized themselves in a Viber group. There were six or seven or more journalists from different media outlets. The sense of competition disappeared and everyone shared information with one another. There were so many events that it was impossible for a single person to cover everything. Sometimes one person could not make it somewhere, so others would send their material. That kind of solidarity exists. However, there is also a segment of openly pro-government, vindictive portals or platforms that show no solidarity toward others and do not expect it in return.*

*Solidarity has begun to flourish. Over the past one, two, or three years, independent media outlets in Vojvodina have been connected through an informal network. Within that network there is enormous solidarity. If I look at journalists reporting in the Slovak language, we became very closely connected during these protests.*

There have also been situations in which colleagues stood up in defense of journalists from tabloid media.

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*During one protest there was a situation where an opposition councillor attacked a journalist from TV Pink. Regardless of the fact that she works for TV Pink, she should not be insulted because of her physical appearance or anything else, so all the female journalists stood up in her defense.*

In some other communities, however, experiences are completely different.

*Solidarity is zero. But there are two or three colleagues we can at least greet on the street.*

Our interlocutor emphasizes that it is important to distinguish between solidarity and support, and that solidarity among journalists is an essential link in strengthening journalists' safety.

*Support is when someone pats you on the shoulder and says they sympathize with you, whereas solidarity means concrete actions. I think we all still have a lot to learn in that regard. These are not recipes I invented; they stem from the very nature of our profession. If someone is attacked, it is not enough to issue a press release—we should all report on it. What is also important is that, for example, we republish the article or report because of which the colleague was attacked and “fire” from every possible weapon.*

## CONCLUSION

The growing trend of pressure and attacks on journalists working in media outlets in the territory of Vojvodina is particularly concerning, especially with the escalation of protests. Increased pressure is noticeable in the digital sphere, but there are also incidents in the field, where journalists are insulted, called out, and even have their phones taken from them. Working under such conditions requires a certain safety strategy at the newsroom level, which in most of the analyzed media outlets does not exist in written form but relies primarily on experience. There is also a clear need for more training on journalists' safety, particularly training on reporting in crisis situations.

In addition to pressure and attacks, media outlets are also facing an uncertain future in terms of financial stability. Although formally transparent, funds distributed through public calls for the co-financing of media projects are largely reserved for media outlets close to the authorities. The suspension of projects funded by the United States Agency for International Development has had a particularly severe impact on the media landscape. Because of their independent and objective reporting, these media outlets also face challenges in securing advertising revenue, as potential clients often avoid them under pressure from the authorities. It is therefore not surprising that, in such an atmosphere, it is difficult to attract qualified staff. It is not easy to find educated professionals, as journalism graduates tend to remain in larger centers or simply abandon the profession altogether. Threats to safety, below-average salaries, and a broader social climate that requires increased field presence significantly reduce the motivation of young people to choose this profession. Those who remain are journalists for whom journalism is a way of life.

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