

**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**

Report on Media Outlets Operating in Southern Serbia

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

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Introduction

According to the latest data from the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS), since the beginning of 2025, 135 cases of threats to journalists' safety have been recorded. In southern Serbia alone: 79 cases of pressure, 34 verbal threats, and 19 physical attacks.

The report "Indicators for the Level of Media Freedom and the Journalist Safety Index 2024" shows that the situation regarding the safety and working conditions of journalists in Serbia further deteriorated during 2024, despite formally existing protection mechanisms and the legal framework. The greatest challenges relate to the increase in attacks and pressures, the inefficiency of institutions, the deterioration of journalists' social status, and the pronounced political instrumentalization of regulatory bodies.

Regarding the competitive co-financing of media projects, the report shows that the system of media co-financing in Serbia is characterized by numerous irregularities, including abuses in the selection of commissions, non-transparent allocation of funds, and favoritism toward media outlets that violate the journalistic code.

Another conclusion of the report is that in certain cases of attacks on journalists, violence was recorded by members of the police.

An increase in strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) has also been observed.

In addition to the complicated social and political environment in which they work, journalists also face economic difficulties, primarily due to low incomes.

All of these aspects were also analyzed by the Center for the Development of Local Media, with a focus on media outlets reporting in southern Serbia.

The data presented in this report were obtained through interviews with Slaviša Milanov, journalist for the FAR portal from Dimitrovgrad; Nenad Paunović, owner of the Pirot Plus Online portal and Plus Radio; Dr. Dušan Aleksić, Assistant Professor at the Department of Communicology and Journalism of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš; Milan Zirojević, Editor-in-Chief of Južne vesti; Mihajlo Stojković, Editor of InfoVranjske; Srđan Nonić, Editor-in-Chief of the Niška inicijativa portal; Nikola Lazić, founder and editor of the Bujanovačke portal; Jeton Ismaili, Editor-in-Chief of the FOL Online portal; and Nikola Doderović, correspondent for Australia's SBS Radio.

Threats to Journalists' Safety

Based on the responses of our interlocutors, the average rating of the level of safety of journalists in southern Serbia is three (on a scale of five). Their general impression is that there have not been too many situations in which journalists' safety was directly threatened, but that circumstances and incidents—especially those occurring during protests—indicate that the situation is moving in that direction.

At the moment, in addition to having a completely devastated media landscape in southern Serbia, it is also highly polarized. There is a strong likelihood that someone may endanger your safety in one way or another, verbally or physically, simply based on the media outlet you belong to, says Dušan Aleksić.

There are ad hoc incidents that physically endanger journalists' safety. One such incident occurred at an SNS rally in Niš some time ago. As for online safety, there are various types of threats, pressures, and comments containing insults and online harassment. But these are part of the job—they happen repeatedly over a long period, so in a way we have become resistant, states Milan Zirojević.

Any media outlet that serves the regime can do whatever it wants without any consequences, while media outlets that try to be even somewhat objective are punished in different ways. Journalists are not safe at all. Either they will be physically attacked by citizens themselves, or the police will simply react by removing them instead of removing the perpetrators of violence, which is counterproductive, believes Nikola Doderović.

Various forms of threats to journalists' safety are recorded in southern Serbia.

The safety of independent journalists in Pirot is seriously threatened. The authorities use all mechanisms—legal, economic, political—to suppress free journalism, states Nenad Paunović.

Spyware was installed on the phone of Slaviša Milanov while the police in Pirot had possession of his phone.

At the end of February, Milanov and his editor Petar Videnov were stopped by traffic police at the entrance to Pirot. After their identification documents were checked, they were taken to a police station under the pretext of testing for psychoactive substances. Upon entering the police station, Milanov was told that he had to leave all personal belongings, including his phone. Although the tests were negative, he spent more than two hours at the police station, where two police officers questioned him and handed him a summons for questioning in the capacity of a citizen. The police questioned him about his journalistic work, the financing of the FAR portal, and his trips to Bulgaria.

After his phone was returned, he noticed that some applications were missing.

I had been detained for more than two hours, so I expected to receive many messages. I received messages from MTS, but the other applications were gone. Wi-Fi was turned off, mobile data was turned off. Wi-Fi sometimes turns off when inactive, but mobile data is never turned off. That seemed suspicious to me. I called friends to see how I could check whether the phone, which had been turned off, had any activity. They recommended a good application that proved to be 99% accurate. Since the moment I entered and handed over the phone, about half an hour later it was turned on. The application listed a lot of security accesses, gallery accesses, contacts—everything had been checked. I informed NUNS and the OSCE. They connected me with the Share Foundation, which determined that there had indeed been certain activities. They contacted Amnesty, and that's how we concluded that the phone had been accessed illegally. I never received any notification from the Ministry of Interior that my phone would be inspected, nor did I give consent or provide a password—absolutely nothing, Milanov explains.

Another journalist who was detained is Nikola Doderović, who was filming an SNS rally accompanied by a colleague from the Faculty of Philosophy.

Six plainclothes police officers stopped us in the middle of the street. They asked for identification and ID cards. I had everything; my colleague did not have his ID card with him. I assumed they would simply fine him 5,000 dinars and that would be the end of it. However, they escalated the situation and started taking him toward the police van near the National Theatre. A woman came to photograph my press ID. I took it from her hand and asked how it was possible that she was photographing my press ID and my personal ID—those are my personal documents.

We went near the National Theatre. They took things out of my backpack; some items they photographed, some they did not. My colleague was kept in the van while they questioned him about where his ID card was. He knew his personal identification number by heart, so they could check everything. A uniformed police officer approached me to put handcuffs on me. He managed to put one cuff on but missed with the other. I started laughing because the situation was absurd. I asked them why they were detaining me, and they said it was because I didn't have an ID card. The police chief came—the only one who introduced himself with a police badge. He told the officer that I was cooperative, that I had all the documentation, and ordered them to remove the handcuffs, says Doderović.

After that, they were taken to the police station and questioned in separate rooms, for reasons that remain unknown.

They asked me how I started working for this media outlet, since when I had been working there, how long my contract lasts, whether the editor has the right to influence what I do or whether I choose topics myself—questions that I am not obliged to answer at all. They also asked whether I had any proof that I was employed, says Doderović.

When they were released, the police told them that they did not recommend returning to the rally, as they could potentially be detained again and have their equipment confiscated.

At a meeting of the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists, I asked the police officer who detained me why he had done so. It was a very amusing situation because he replied that books were sticking out of my backpack, says Doderović.

A journalist from Bujanovačke received verbal threats from traffic police officers in 2021.

The most drastic example occurred during the coronavirus period. I believe it was the summer of 2021. A colleague was making a video report from the square—whether the measures were being respected or not. He accidentally filmed three traffic police officers: two in uniform on duty and one colleague in civilian clothes sitting in a café wearing shorts. One of them stood up and asked why he was being filmed. Verbal threats followed. We immediately reported it to the police, and they initiated disciplinary proceedings. The entire police department reacted that same day, but the case never received any prosecutorial or judicial epilogue, says Nikola Lazić.

During the COVID-19 period, Jeton Ismaili also received threats.

Two brothers died from the consequences of COVID-19 within 24 hours, and I published that information. Their uncle came to my house to threaten me. He entered the house and made verbal threats. Everything was properly reported; the police filed criminal charges, but the prosecutor's office dismissed the case due to lack of evidence, says Ismaili.

A journalist from Južne vesti was struck on the hand by a participant of an SNS rally in Niš while reporting and was prevented from performing her job.

At the end of the rally organized by the SNS in Niš, an incident occurred. Our journalist was filming people who had come from other cities, whom we called 'loyalists,' people of questionable security background. One participant—most likely someone from Novi Sad from those circles—had physical contact with her, struck her on the hand and prevented her from doing her job. The police removed our journalist, not the man. The case was reported and entered regular court proceedings. There has been no resolution to this day, says Zirojević.

Members of the InfoVranjske editorial staff received insults and derogatory names.

We were most frequently targeted by the City Board of the Serbian Progressive Party and by the football club 'Mineralac,' which plays in a local amateur league. The late editor Stojković received the worst insults in written form—he was called a pig and other derogatory names. The Commissioner for the Protection of Equality reacted and requested that the City Board issue an apology. They have still not apologized. Journalist Slavomir Kostić even received a huge graffiti banner from FC 'Mineralac' reading: 'Kostić, you trash, FC Mineralac will not pay you racketeering money.' They wrote derogatory texts about us. They called me a drug addict, a little pig. These were attacks directly from the political party in power, says

Mihajlo Stojković.

Derogatory comments are mostly received in the online sphere.

If you touch on any sensitive topic or target someone, if it is of public interest or involves a wider group of people, there is no chance you will avoid derogatory comments, even in your inbox, says Nonić.

We receive many threats from anonymous profiles on social networks. Since we operate in a multi-ethnic environment, they usually accuse us of being foreign mercenaries, 'Šiptar' mercenaries, that we are paid by Pristina or by Kurti, says Lazić.

Inadequate Reaction of the Police and the Prosecutor's Office

Most of our interlocutors state that they report cases of threats to safety, but what they see as problematic is the insufficient work of the police regarding journalists' safety and, in some cases, the absence of an adequate response.

We have the declarative side—both the prosecution and the police—and we also have contact points for media regarding attacks on journalists. However, it all remains declarative. We advocate for journalists to be safe, but only a small number of cases are actually processed to a serious level that would produce meaningful results capable of preventing such attacks in the future, believes Aleksić.

I think that the authorities responsible for security do not go all the way in some cases, especially when threats and coercion are concerned. Sometimes they initiate cases, but then they stop them and there is no clear outcome, which encourages new threats and new pressures, says Jeton Ismaili.

Speaking about the attack on the Južne vesti journalist, he points out that the police protected the perpetrator instead of protecting her.

The dysfunctionality of the system inevitably affects the media profession as well. When you have a captured, privatized system where the police protect someone's private interests and serve as security for a private gathering, we cannot speak about any public function or about journalists performing a public duty safely in the way they should, says Aleksić.

At an SNS rally, Srđan Nonić was threatened by a man who said he would stab him with a knife.

Within five minutes I found out who he was because Niš is a relatively small city. I even

have a video recording. I reported it, went in for questioning—and nothing happened. I'm not saying that such incidents should not be reported; in conversations with Veran Matic and colleagues I always say they should be reported. But sometimes I lose so much time. I might be traveling privately when the police or the prosecutor's office call me and say they must question me within 48 hours due to a national instruction. In the end it results in nothing. Even when you have a recording and messages as evidence. What are they waiting for? For me to be stabbed with a knife so that I can say: 'Look, here is the hole in my head from a wooden plank or footage of me running through the city so I wouldn't get into a fight with someone,' says Nonić.

According to Slaviša Milanov, the police reaction regarding the spying case is “equal to zero.”

First of all, the Internal Control of the Ministry of Interior did nothing following my complaint. They only forwarded it to the head of the Pirot police department for a statement. That's all they did.

Secondly, as far as I know, the prosecutor's office is doing nothing on the matter. I'm not the only one involved—around ten activists were targeted as well. This happened in February 2024, and we filed criminal charges already in March. After Amnesty's report there was some urgency, but it remained like that, Milanov said.

Not only was the reaction inadequate, but in his case his safety and privacy were violated by the police themselves.

I expected the police to protect us while we were doing our job. However, it turned out that they were obviously acting in the service of politicians, and probably criminals, to obtain certain information that was presumably interesting to them, says Milanov.

For Nenad Paunović as well, the police “were an instrument of pressure rather than protection.”

Strategies and Training for Journalists' Safety

Safety strategies in the analyzed media outlets generally do not exist, but there are unwritten rules and verbal agreements. Some editorial offices developed protocols after journalists experienced incidents and their safety was threatened, which is the case with the FAR newsroom. Even where a protocol exists, it often remains only on paper.

Journalists from all the analyzed media outlets reported from protests, and the experiences of some show that protests can easily turn into crisis situations. They have not reported from other crisis situations.

Our interlocutors note that there used to be training for reporting from crisis situations, but

that such training has been lacking in recent years. However, given the development of protest-related situations and the increasing threats to journalists' safety, there is a need for such training.

Training related to journalists' safety, both physical and digital, is becoming more available.

In the foreign Australian media outlet for which Nikola Doderović works, such training is mandatory.

As SBS we have our own intranet system where every time we renew our contract we must go through a type of training that includes basic ethical standards, editorial policy, and of course different forms of reporting and how we should behave and what we should pay attention to. I like that it is not just watching a video or reading a text. They expect us to complete a test within a certain time frame, where they ask how you would react in a particular situation and whether you think something is acceptable or not. In that way they see how we actually think. That is very good, says Doderović.

Cooperation with Journalists' Associations

Almost all editorial offices cooperate with journalists' associations, organizations, and bodies responsible for journalists' safety. Cooperation exists with the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS), the Journalists' Association of Serbia (UNS), Local Press, the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists, and the Association of Independent Electronic Media. Despite being located in southern Serbia, some editorial offices have also cooperated with the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina. Cooperation also exists with the OSCE, Civic Initiatives, and KROKODIL.

The experience of Slaviša Milanov shows that even a meeting with contacts from associations and organizations can prevent more serious situations.

Before the pandemic they often mentioned a certain criminal figure in our district. We spoke with contacts in the Pirot District. During one meeting we pointed out that there were indications something might happen. No crime had occurred, but everything that had been happening suggested it might. After that, the mentions stopped. Politicians probably received information that we had attended that meeting and talked about it, so the references to that name stopped," says Milanov.

Although most interlocutors assessed cooperation with journalists' associations as good, some believe it should be more concrete at the local level.

It seems to me that this cooperation is quite passive. There is no real interaction about

how either side could help the other. For example, associations could have direct data about what is happening at the local level and get a more complete picture, while journalists could receive some form of protection, advice, or whatever they need in order to perform their work as professionally as possible, says Dušan Aleksić.

Regardless of whether we have a strategy for journalists' safety or whether NUNS, UNS, or any friendly associations react, it carries no real weight in practice. They are our support and we are grateful for that support from start to finish. I do not want to sound ungrateful, but I do not see that anything has changed simply because someone reacted. I am afraid that associations—especially journalists' associations—are far removed from local communities where their members or those seeking help actually live. It seems easier to live as a journalist in Belgrade right now than to live as a journalist in Vranje, Leskovac, Lebane, or anywhere else, says Mihajlo Stojković.

Access to Information Depends on Political Will and Individual Discretion

According to the experiences of our interlocutors, access to information from public institutions in southern Serbia depends on political will, but also on the will of individual officials.

In most cases institutions are not open to journalists. The biggest problem is that there is a selection of journalists—those who are acceptable and those who are not. For example, when sending invitations or press releases about topics of general interest that should be communicated to all media and all journalists, this is not done. Instead, a list of acceptable media is created—those who will publish the statement without changes or with minimal changes—while others who actually do journalism, meaning those who are not a propaganda extension of the authorities, are forced to file formal requests for information of public importance. Very often they encounter closed doors or excuses for why the information cannot be delivered, even when they ask the simplest questions, such as what will happen with a certain street or why it has been dug up, says Dušan Aleksić.

Slaviša Milanov states that local politicians do not understand the role of the media and that they also misuse the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance.

We send them journalists' questions and they refer us to the Law, which has nothing to do with the matter. We also submitted formal requests for access to information, but they always use the full fifteen days to respond, by which time the information is no longer timely, says Milanov.

His experience shows that even an appeal to the Commissioner for Information of Public

Importance is not a guarantee of receiving answers.

I reliably know from various sources that during the mandate of Dragana Sotirovski there was a ban on communicating with Južne vesti, and that all city administrations were instructed not to communicate with us. Then we submitted requests, placing them in a situation where they would violate the law if they did not respond. Some were not willing to violate the law, so they answered. The current situation is that some respond and some do not. There are many public enterprises that do not respond. We are also not invited to City Council sessions or events organized by the mayor. Invitations are selective—some media are invited, others are not. Recently we were not invited to several important events for citizens in City Hall because urgent press conferences were announced only a few hours in advance and we were not invited, so we could not attend, says Milan Zirojević.

Mihajlo Stojković states that the InfoVranjske newsroom had positive experiences with institutions at the national level.

As far as national institutions are concerned, we have not had any problems so far. One of the biggest collaborations we had in this regard was with the Treasury, where we requested something and within 14 days they delivered a large amount of documentation, says Stojković.

Srđan Nonić also states that he manages to obtain information through formal requests.

Sometimes I receive an answer within a single day when someone has no other work and wants to remove the request from their agenda, or perhaps they have an interest in giving me information because they see whom I am 'hunting' and they do not like that person. That happens too. Usually I receive answers within 15 days. I have a ton of proceedings and appeals before the Commissioner that are currently active. I do not even know how many appeal procedures I have won so far. Unfortunately, those procedures take a long time. I have won almost all of them—only once did the Faculty of Law in Niš win against me, says Nonić.

According to him, during the term of the previous mayor there was a correspondent who called directors and city officials who received requests for access to information of public importance, and they were all instructed that whenever they received a request from the Niška inicijativa portal they should call him, after which he would tell them how to respond.

Nikola Lazić from Bujanovačke states that they do not face situations where someone hides information from them.

We do not often resort to formal requests. The last time we used one was when we were working on salaries in the public sector at the local level—in healthcare, the judiciary, the police, public administration, and municipal administration. We received the data before the 15-day deadline, except from the police, who did not provide it. When we send questions to a ministry, we first send them by email. So far we have not had problems with that. We

also have our own sources and methods. We have positive experiences with directors of public enterprises—they answer the phone and respond to our questions, whether the information is favorable to them or not, says Lazić.

Political Pressure

Due to their reporting, local authorities exert pressure on certain newsrooms. These pressures manifest through targeting in the media, attempts at extortion, pressure exerted through family members, as well as indirect pressure through intermediaries.

Nikola Lazić states that *Bujanovačke* receives “well-intentioned suggestions” through intermediaries that they are “worse than N1” and that they “should tone things down a bit.”

According to him, they had a continuous conflict with the former president of the municipality.

He simply didn't like the way we reported. He was the president of the municipality until a year ago. He threatened to ban us from covering the sessions of the Municipal Assembly and the Municipal Council, accusing us of attacking his family and being personal. This started three years ago when we wrote about the public procurement for New Year's lighting. The conflict wasn't with the entire administration, but only with him, Lazić explains.

Slaviša Milanov says that after they publish an article to which the mayor refuses to respond, retaliation follows very quickly.

We publish a story to which the mayor refuses to respond. The very next day he visits another local television station and smears us there, labeling us, calling us opposition supporters, spies and who knows what else, effectively targeting us. At first I didn't report these incidents because I thought there was no point, but in the end it turned out to be good that we started reporting them, so that the continuity of their behavior could be documented, says Milanov.

Nenad Paunović described a situation that happened to him due to his reporting, which he characterized as a “classic attempt at political retaliation.”

After the tragedy on December 25, 2022, when a tanker derailed near Pirot and ammonia leaked, I found the body of the deceased Turkish driver and published that information before anyone else. Two days after the tragedy, I asked Minister Irena Vujović some tough questions. After that, real hell began. I was detained and held in the police station for four hours, and a high-ranking official from Belgrade ordered the prosecutor in Niš to forward my case to the prosecutor's office in Pirot with the aim of having me arrested, says Paunović.

Milan Zirojević states that the authorities know they cannot influence their editorial policy.

These are mostly psychological pressures—lecturing, malicious interpretations of our work—all of which are unpleasant. This has been happening during the current mandate. During Dragana Sotirovski's mandate there was significant psychological pressure on journalists who asked her questions in the field, because that was part of her tactic. I can say that at the beginning it was skillfully done on her part. She used her journalistic experience and work in the media, but also a certain kind of manipulation and psychological pressure. This continued throughout her entire mandate. Once we realized what was happening, we developed techniques to counter it and I believe we did so successfully, says Zirojević.

As one of the mechanisms of pressure, he cites the continuous presence of tax inspectors in the newsroom of *Južne vesti* during 2017 and 2018.

For a year and a half they were in Južne vesti under various suspicions. In the end nothing happened, because it was simply administrative pressure and nothing else, says Zirojević.

The newsroom of *Bujanovačke* has been receiving continuous threats from a local politician after reporting about him.

He is a councilor and part of the local ruling coalition. On his social media profiles he constantly posts that we are Ustaše, that we are mercenaries, that he will expose who pays us, how much we are paid, who we work for and for which services. Even in a small community, and especially anywhere else, that is not pleasant because people read it, says Lazić.

Our interlocutors assess that the majority of media outlets in their local communities are under the control of the authorities, which is most evident in the allocation of funding through media co-financing calls.

Dušan Aleksić explains the mechanisms of media control:

The most common mechanisms of media control are, first of all, avoiding certain topics if it is assessed that they could harm the rating of a local politician, especially the president, since we have a very centralized system of government where one person makes all decisions and the others merely execute them. There are even bizarre situations in which certain events are denied even though they were never reported on, but if the ruling party sends a denial about something it gets published, leaving citizens confused because they do not know which event is being referred to. A third case is when topics are placed in a certain context that does not correspond to reality at all—that is, they are interpreted in a way that suits a particular political agenda rather than what is objective, which should be one of the fundamental postulates of journalism. There is also the banning of certain individuals from appearing in the media because they are considered undesirable.

If a media outlet attempts to present an objective picture, it will face consequences. Aleksić cited the example of Belami Television.

In Niš we have a situation where Belami Television—whose reporting could often be described as being close to the authorities—broadcast the protests of March 1 live and reported on student protests in general. Because of that, not only were their funds withdrawn, but many sponsors directly connected with the authorities were prohibited from advertising on that television station, which practically led to its shutdown. They halved the number of employees. That television station is now on life support. Whatever one may think of it, it has existed for 30 years and in a way represents a brand of the city of Niš, says Aleksić.

Our interlocutors themselves have experienced attempts by local authorities to influence their editorial policies.

First they tried through blackmail, and now they are using SLAPP lawsuits and the withholding of funds to destroy us, says Nenad Paunović.

Jeton Ismaili states that attempts to influence editorial policy are particularly pronounced during election periods.

When election campaigns are underway, actors involved in those elections attempt to influence the newsroom. Most often they try to prevent opposing parties from having access to the media, thereby favoring a particular party, he says.

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Without Media Pluralism

Despite the large number of media outlets, media pluralism practically does not exist. According to our interlocutors, neither independent nor truly objective and professional local newsrooms exist. The average score given by our interlocutors for media pluralism is two (on a scale from one to five).

Dušan Aleksić states:

Media outlets that currently operate in the way media should operate survive on enthusiasm alone, which is neither sustainable nor a systemic solution. If you want to work in the media, you either have to become an extension of the authorities or turn your media outlet into a platform for various unlawful activities.

Mihajlo Stojković believes that journalism cannot be professional in the conditions in which they operate.

How can I be professional and objective if the president of the city committee of the

ruling party refuses to talk to me? If there is no other side, we cannot do our job. We live in a society that has been completely devastated. Everyone says that local media in Serbia are a disaster. I like to say that local media in Serbia are the best they can be at this moment.

Nikola Doderović emphasizes that the lack of media pluralism is not only a problem in southern Serbia but throughout the entire country.

When you look at it, a minority of influential and morally questionable individuals controls all the media in Serbia. Media freedom is getting worse year after year, which is confirmed by these detentions and attacks on journalists. Anyone who disagrees with or criticizes the regime is immediately labeled a foreign mercenary or a fascist.

He adds that independent and professional media are on the verge of collapse.

The majority of the media environment in Serbia consists of editors who work more on assignment than according to the basic ethical principles of journalism. At the local level we do not have a single independent television station. We have almost a complete media blackout.

Such circumstances also affect solidarity among journalists.

Even when Amnesty published its report, no one in the district reported on it. Solidarity—zero. At first they didn't believe it had happened. They believed the story told by the police and the BIA that it was an absolute lie, says Slaviša Milanov.

Nenad Paunović also points to a lack of solidarity.

Last year, when the city didn't give us a single dinar, I sat in the municipal hall and went on a hunger strike. The next day the mayor called all the journalists together. They wrote an open letter against me saying that I should retire. All the directors and editors-in-chief signed it. That's solidarity.

Nevertheless, there are also positive examples.

Milan Zirojević states:

Several situations this year showed that solidarity does exist. After the latest attack on our journalist there was a protest, a gathering of students and journalists in front of the newsroom. There was also journalistic solidarity when the RTS correspondent in Niš was insulted. These were, I can say, bright examples of solidarity among journalists.

Nikola Lazić also says that solidarity among journalists exists, noting that in Bujanovac they exchange information, news and photographs.

Nikola Doderović particularly noticed solidarity after he was detained, when colleagues contacted him and each wanted to hear his story.

I'm very glad to see that understanding in the field as well. For example, when we

need to record a shot, no one tries to push only their own story; everyone tries to ensure that we can all get something out of it—information, images, the event itself. That is the most important thing. When we maintain a pleasant relationship and respect one another, we are not only showing solidarity but also maintaining the professionalism of journalism.

Funds from Competitions Reserved for the “Suitable”

Most of the analyzed newsrooms refrain from applying for calls for funding of media content, both at the local level and those issued by the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications, considering the effort futile since it is already known which media outlets will have their projects approved.

A large number of responsible, professional media outlets do not want to participate at all, because collecting the documentation requires a great deal of work, and significant creative effort is invested in designing meaningful media content, only for the idea, at best, not to be accepted, and at worst to be passed on to someone else who is supposed to receive the funding, says Aleksić.

InfoVranjske does not participate in local calls.

We do not apply because they have decided to allocate 50, 60, or 70 percent—depending on the year—to television stations. The President of the City Assembly, who at the time was the Deputy Mayor, stated that television is an expensive ‘toy’ and that they must have more. Then the television stations have their own portals, so they take a share there as well. They also have their own radio stations, so they take another piece of the pie there. And then I should write a project proposal and do reporting for some 150,000 dinars, which I don’t even know when will be paid. I do not want to sound rude—for a local media outlet, 150,000 dinars is not a small amount—but it is impossible to work with them for that kind of money, explains Stojković.

They also do not apply for calls from the Ministry because, as he says, they do not have the capacity to cover such important topics, justify the European projects they are already implementing, and at the same time follow regular daily events.

*I certainly do not agree with the way funds are allocated. I think it is completely wrong and leads nowhere, although I believe that co-financing of media is a good idea, a good concept. I am not against the idea itself. What I oppose is the absence of clear criteria on what is required to receive the funds. If it is readership—what readership does that refer to? *Informer* is widely read as well. If it is the number of employees, then Radio Television of Serbia should receive even more money. What is it that will determine whether my media*

outlet is important for Vranje or not? Stojković states.

Although, as Nenad Paunović says, they deliberately apply, Radio Plus did not receive funding in the city call, while the Ministry rejected all four of their applications.

The funds are distributed to those who are politically suitable, Paunović states.

The average score that our interlocutors gave for the transparency of the call process is **two (2)**.

Milan Zirojević says that transparency exists, but only as a façade.

As with many other things in this country, there is a façade. That façade of transparency exists—you know who sits on the commissions and who received money for which projects. All of that exists, but it is only a façade. There is no monitoring of those projects. I believe no one actually examines what was ultimately done with that money. Secondly, this model is, in my opinion, outdated and serves exclusively to finance media outlets close to the regime. It stems from the façade decision that there should be no media in public ownership. Media outlets are privatized, but they are then indirectly financed from the state budget. That model—as well as sponsorships from state-owned companies—has produced a huge number of media outlets in Serbia that serve no purpose.

Jeton Ismaili adds that, aside from seeing who received funding, there is no transparency. He notes that it is impossible to know how or why a project was given a particular score or why it received a certain amount of funding.

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Financial Instability – The Greatest Challenge for Media Operations

The key challenge facing media outlets is financial instability. Our interlocutors themselves often wonder how their media organizations manage to survive at all. Nenad Paunović says he does not know how his outlet will operate after August, when the project that currently provides salaries for his employees expires.

Only a very small percentage of media revenue comes from marketing. As a key obstacle to developing advertising revenue, interviewees point out that southern Serbia is economically underdeveloped and lacks a strong industrial base. Even where industry exists, business owners often avoid advertising in independent media outlets so as not to come into conflict with local authorities. Another problem is that company owners are not always aware of the importance of advertising in local media.

Given the “punishment” of independent media through denial of funds in calls organized by the Ministry and local authorities, many outlets turn to foreign donor funds, whose projects

are crucial for their survival. The donor most frequently mentioned is EED, and many analyzed media outlets cooperated with IREX, assistance that ended after USAID programs were suspended.

However, these funds come with difficulties, including complex procedures, extensive reporting obligations, and, according to some interlocutors, lobbying.

Nenad Paunović says:

It is very difficult for us to obtain funding. The procedures are complicated, and funds often do not focus on local problems in smaller communities.

Nikola Lazić adds:

One of the problems for all of us who work with donors is the complicated reporting process, which requires additional staff and resources. We have had very negative experiences with some donors in that regard.

Srđan Nonić says:

I have applied dozens of times to foreign donors. They have certain correspondents who ask about who we are. If those correspondents have a negative opinion about you, you will never receive any project.

He adds that donor funds are almost inaccessible to them because they lack the capacity to prepare such projects and do not have lobbying networks. Most of these organizations are based in Belgrade, meaning that the further away a newsroom is from Belgrade, the less access it has to international funds.

A special case is *Južne vesti*, where the majority of funding—between 50 and 60 percent—comes from the company's IT sector.

Almost all interlocutors agree that journalists' salaries are not sufficient for a decent living. Wages are often at the minimum level, forcing journalists to take additional jobs or work in multiple newsrooms simultaneously.

Most of the newsrooms whose editors we interviewed are predominantly male.

Interest among young people in journalism varies depending on the environment. It is somewhat higher in Niš as a university center. However, smaller towns such as Pirot are losing young people, who often leave for studies and remain in the cities where they studied or move abroad, particularly to Bulgaria.

Srđan Nonić comments:

As far as I can see—and I follow what others are doing—there are no new journalists in Niš. Who is responsible for that? Journalists themselves. Niš has both communication studies and journalism programs, yet despite these two programs they have not produced

journalists who are interested in their profession. You shape future generations—you should be the one encouraging them to pursue journalism.

Jeton Ismaili adds:

I think young people don't even know what journalism is, let alone want to practice it.

Only a small number of newsrooms have the resources to train young journalists, although they are familiar with training programs offered by professional associations and organizations.

Milan Zirojević states that one problem in hiring young staff, aside from the inability to offer competitive salaries, is that many candidates “have formal education but lack the essential skills required for the profession.”

Mihajlo Stojković also considers finances the biggest obstacle to attracting new staff.

We had one young woman who comes from a family where a journalist's salary is her weekly allowance. Why would she stay? And secondly, what happened to me was that two journalists who worked for InfoVranjske decided to continue their careers in political parties. That is incomprehensible to me because I am not someone who would make such a decision. But obviously that 'flirting' with politicians and information can be seductive, and they think they could do it as well.

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SLAPP Lawsuits

The regime uses the financial instability of media outlets as a tool to suppress free journalism through **SLAPP lawsuits**, whose purpose is to financially exhaust media organizations.

Most media outlets analyzed in this report have not faced SLAPP lawsuits.

However, Nenad Paunović has faced as many as six. According to the Plus Online portal, Paunović was sued over several texts published on the *Pirot Plus Online* portal in which he expressed his views and opinions about the reporting of certain media outlets and correspondents in Pirot. In the most recent ruling of the Belgrade Court of Appeal, in a joint lawsuit filed by Zoran Panić (editor of TV Pirot), Aleksandar Ćirić (owner of *Pirotske vesti*), and Vita Ćirić (correspondent of *Novosti*), Paunović was ordered to pay a total of 582,000 dinars: 252,000 dinars in litigation costs and 110,000 dinars to each plaintiff for alleged damage to honor and reputation.

Paunović describes the ruling as a major blow to both his work and his livelihood. In addition to support from his family, he received assistance from the organization Civic Initiatives, the KROKODIL Association, and from citizens following KROKODIL's public appeal.

InfoVranjske was among the first media outlets to receive a SLAPP lawsuit from the Millennium Team.

Mihajlo Stojković explains:

We were in Vranjska Banja where Vuk Jeremić and the People's Party held a press conference saying that the Millennium Team had purchased the "Jaroslav Černi" Water Institute. They also said the company would buy the entire spa complex, all the spas, that they wanted to control water, air and land. The entire political speech was not directed so much against the Millennium Team as it was against the system itself, with more references to Aleksandar Vučić and his deals with them. At that moment the Millennium Team sued three media outlets—us, Jugpress and Vranje News. Jugpress wasn't even at the conference; they simply published the party's official statement. If I remember correctly, the first lawsuit was for 100,000 euros, plus another 20,000 or 30,000 euros against our late editor Saša Stojković personally as the responsible editor. Eventually the amount was reduced. After Saša passed away in 2021, they withdrew the lawsuit against him in February 2022 and reduced the claim against us to 100 euros. The case still hasn't been officially concluded.

Stojković emphasizes that every prosecutor's office that accepts such cases against media outlets should understand that it is determining the fate of a local media outlet.

The judge who decides to take 60,000, 50,000 or 45,000 dinars out of our pocket must know that for us this is serious money. But state institutions are not interested in that, because whether they work or not they receive their salary on the 1st and the 15th. In that sense, the private sector does not interest them at all.

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Srđan Nonić has also faced a SLAPP lawsuit.

I still have one case that has been ongoing since 2021. I wrote about the reappointment of the director of the Secondary School Student Dormitory, and one of the actors in that story—the then president of the governing board—sued me for defamation without any grounds. I only presented data I obtained from official records and from the PIO Fund—who was the president of the governing board and who signed what with whom. There were no insults. The process has been ongoing for four years. I lost in the first instance, and now it is before the appellate court. The ruling says I am guilty because I placed the plaintiff in a negative context.

CONCLUSION

The data obtained through interviews are consistent with the findings of the report **“Indicators for the Level of Media Freedom and the Journalist Safety Index 2024.”**

Journalists in southern Serbia are exposed to all forms of threats to their safety—political pressure, verbal threats, and during protests they can easily become targets of physical attacks. Their safety is also threatened by those who should ensure it: the police, who detain them without explanation and even install spyware on journalists’ phones.

Some interlocutors identified distance from the center, namely Belgrade, as a particular problem, both in terms of cooperation with journalists’ associations and access to donor funding.

The survival of small independent newsrooms in southern Serbia is uncertain due to financial instability. An increasing number of media outlets are abandoning competitions for the co-financing of media content due to numerous irregularities in the process, while advertising revenue is practically impossible to obtain—primarily because of the underdeveloped economy of southern Serbia and the influence of politics. Those to whom independent journalism is inconvenient exploit this financial instability. As a result, SLAPP lawsuits have become an active mechanism in southern Serbia, aimed at financially exhausting independent media outlets.

Low salaries and poor working conditions do not attract new staff, except in Niš as a university center. Consequently, professional journalism in smaller towns in southern Serbia survives thanks to the persistence of journalists and editors who place the public interest above all else.

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