

**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 Sandžak

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

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Belgrade – Požarevac – Sandžak, September 2025

Introduction

Sandžak, a region in southwestern Serbia, has for decades been a place where different identities, interests and political ambitions intersect. Local media are often the first line of information for citizens – but also the first targets of pressure.

Unlike the rest of Serbia, where the influence of a single party dominates, here power is shared among several Bosniak political parties, with the mandatory presence of Serbian coalition partners. This balance of power creates space for pluralism, but at the same time produces additional challenges for journalists, who often find themselves between opposing political and economic interests.

Despite limited resources and growing pressure, several newsrooms in Sandžak persist in maintaining professional and independent reporting. Their importance goes beyond the local framework: in an environment where every piece of news becomes part of a broader political game, it is precisely these media outlets that safeguard the fundamental premise of journalism – the public's right to accurate and timely information.

This report is based on interviews with journalists from Novi Pazar and Prijepolje: Enes Radetinac (A1 portal), Ishak Slezović (Radio Sto Plus), Medin Halilović (S News), Mileva Malešić (TV Forum) and Mirela Fazlić (foruminfo.rs). The aim of this report is to present the state of journalists' safety, institutional responses, experiences with political pressure and lawsuits, as well as challenges in access to information and the media environment in these local communities.

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Threats to Journalists' Safety

According to data from the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS), August 2025 recorded the highest number of incidents targeting journalists in a single month since the beginning of the year – 46. In this month alone, there were 25 physical attacks, including 14 attacks by police officers, 13 threats to the lives and physical safety of journalists, 6 threats against media outlets and 2 attacks against media and organizations. At the same time, Reporters Without Borders announced that between July 1 and August 25, 34 physical attacks on journalists were recorded in Serbia – more than the total annual number of such attacks during the past five years.

The average rating given by our interviewees when assessing the safety of journalists in this region is 3 out of a maximum of 5.

Interviewees from Novi Pazar and Prijepolje point out that there have been fewer physical attacks in recent years than before, but threats, targeting and online harassment remain constant.

Testimonies from the Radio Sto Plus newsroom indicate a noticeable change in the nature of pressure over the past several years: from direct attacks and infrastructure sabotage, through a period of institutional neglect, to a recent wave of lawsuits and financial exhaustion.

As a brief “typology” of risks, the testimonies repeatedly mention online threats, messages delivered “through intermediaries”, public labeling and incidents at public events.

Both a colleague and I have been targeted, and generally these things come directly. In smaller communities they tell you these things in the street, in restaurants, even through intermediaries, through family members or friends. These are things you cannot prove in court, and if you wanted to bring those people as witnesses you would expose them to unpleasant situations, says Medin Halilović.

On one occasion, when there was a programme with a representative of the Islamic Community in Serbia, someone left a comment saying that media like this should all be killed. Another case was literal stalking. When my wife and I were in Rome, we received a call from a Montenegrin number at five in the morning. The person told me that I should be beaten and killed. I reported it to the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia; they filed a complaint on my behalf, but it lasted for days because the man had obtained my phone number, says Enes Radetinac.

In Prijepolje, female journalists testify about rude behaviour and targeting which, originating in the political context, spills over into everyday communication. Incidents involving identity checks and unpleasant situations during public gatherings have further complicated their

work in the field.

I was at that protest and walking as a citizen when additional police forces arrived. They ordered us to move to the sidewalks and began checking our IDs. I reached for my bag to take out my documents, and a man next to me said: she is a journalist, she is a journalist. The officer responded rudely, saying he didn't care who I was and demanded my ID... When it comes to safety, it is perhaps most visible when local politicians behave rudely toward journalists, most often toward female journalists. Others then adopt that narrative. When journalists from TV Forum ask questions at press conferences, politicians say: 'Oh, it's those from Forum again. They are asking something again...' I won't elaborate further, says Mileva Malešić.

Four years ago a colleague, journalist Edin Hamidović, was killed in Sjenica, and the perpetrators have still not been prosecuted. The court process is ongoing and the main perpetrator, the killer, is on the run; allegedly they cannot locate him. For that reason alone I would give the lowest possible rating, concludes Salahudin Fetić.

(Non)Action by Institutions

The experiences of our interviewees with the police, the prosecutor's office and the courts vary between swift reactions in individual cases and a complete absence of action. Inconsistency is evident – from the prompt identification of suspects to the dismissal of complaints without explanation.

The police reacted quickly in the sense that they very quickly found the person who threatened me. However, the essence of the problem, in my opinion, is that the prosecutor's office did not react properly, because they contacted me only after I agreed not to sue the person. Many people called me about that person who threatened me, saying that his mother had cancer, his father came to apologise and offered anything necessary, saying it wasn't against me, he wanted to set someone up, whatever.... After all those pressures I eventually agreed that the matter be settled. Only then did the prosecutor's office call me to sign a statement agreeing that the person would pay a certain amount to charity, and that was the end of it, says Enes Radetinac.

Testimonies also indicate a pattern in which complaints are dismissed or remain without an outcome, especially when online threats are involved.

I reported several cases and all of them were dismissed. Except for one where I experienced a direct physical attack on the street back in 2008. It is unheard of to have a court proceeding in which the prosecutor does not appear at the hearing, yet the presiding judge records that the hearing took place. In that case the accused was acquitted, even

though he had threatened me with a firearm... I do not know of a single case in which the prosecutor's office here initiated proceedings and the court issued a final conviction for attacks against journalists. Such a case does not exist in Novi Pazar. That statistic alone shows the real picture of safety and how difficult it is to report from this environment and to engage in journalism at all, says Medin Halilović.

In some cases, newsrooms receive first-instance rulings confirming that they were targets of pressure. However, at the appellate level the judgments are sometimes overturned, with explanations that effectively legitimize the behaviour of officials because of the positions they hold.

At one point the mayor entered our newsroom and threatened to beat us, saying certain colleagues would be "swallowed by darkness". We consulted associations and lawyers and filed a lawsuit. The first-instance ruling was in our favour, but on appeal it was overturned. He was acquitted, with the explanation that he was acting as mayor and defending the function of the mayor, says Mileva Malešić.

Protection Strategies and Training for Journalists' Safety

Local media newsrooms in Sandžak primarily rely on unwritten rules and internal coordination. Formal protocols rarely exist; when they do, they are usually created within project activities and are not consistently applied. In practice, journalists combine caution in the field, minimal protective equipment and documentation of incidents, while identifying the lack of systematic training—particularly for working in crowds and for digital security—as the greatest deficit.

Regarding internal procedures, a practice common to all the newsrooms interviewed is that after an incident the responsible person and the governing body are quickly informed, and a brief record of the event is made.

We do not have a formal document, but we do have a practice—to inform the editor, the chair of the Managing Board and the newsroom about the incident. We then analyse what happened, discuss it, and only after that take further steps, says Mileva Malešić.

Our interviewees identify digital security as an extremely important issue for which local newsrooms often lack sufficient resources.

Because of labeling and insults—often national in nature—we introduced stricter moderation of comments. We also have a written document created within a project... but honestly, it is not always consistently followed because there are not enough resources, says Mirela Fazlić.

The experience of TV Forum's YouTube channel being hacked further increased awareness

about procedures related to account access, two-factor authentication and regular backups—along with the assessment that targeted training sessions and periodic checks are necessary.

In relation to institutions, some newsrooms maintain so-called “open lines” with the police and the prosecutor’s office just in case, but in operational terms they primarily rely on de-escalation in the field and precise documentation. The usual set of steps includes preserving messages, recording phone calls, saving photographs and recordings, and assessing when it is safer to postpone publication and temporarily treat the material as evidence.

Cooperation with Journalists’ Associations

Our interviewees are largely aligned regarding cooperation with professional associations and organizations—such cooperation is mostly ad hoc, usually when an incident occurs (threats, hacking attacks) or when formal complaints need to be submitted. Support is particularly emphasized in digital incidents and in situations when it is important to alert the wider public about threats.

When threats or digital incidents occur, cooperation is primarily operational: filing complaints, receiving advice and technical assistance. In the statements, the organizations mentioned include the Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia (NUNS), the Independent Journalists’ Association of Vojvodina (NDNV) and the SHARE Foundation.

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Access to Information

Interviewees describe access to information as slow, selective and often formalized to the point of rendering current reporting meaningless: instead of providing prompt answers, institutions require written requests and rely on maximum legal deadlines. The Commissioner for Information of Public Importance is mentioned as an important mechanism, but not a guarantee of results. In practice, journalists rely on a local network of sources, while official statements are often absent—especially when the story calls those responsible to account.

We obtain information in many ways—we still rely on the basic journalistic tool, which is maintaining and cultivating sources everywhere, from doormen to directors. Whether they are insiders, friends, acquaintances or neighbours, these sources are crucial. They tell us the important things—what is happening in the municipal company, the court, the police, the hospital... As for the formal procedures that we have been forced into in recent years, it used to be unimaginable to call the mayor and ask for a statement only to be told by a secretary to submit a written request and wait fifteen or thirty days. By then it is no longer news. That is a very unfair relationship toward the media. On the other hand, they complain that journalists

write one-sided stories. But I have to write one-sided stories when you refuse to give a statement. Lately, it has been happening more and more often that they refuse to respond, especially when the story concerns their responsibility—when the reporting might “call them out.” In such cases, in as many as 80% of instances they avoid giving statements or answering our verbal questions, instead insisting that we address them strictly in writing, says Medin Halilović.

I recently received a response to one of my requests directing me to the public procurement portal, even though I check that portal every day and know exactly what is published there. When I pointed out that the information was not there and asked for clarification, they again directed me—quite dismissively—to the procurement portal, and that was when I began drafting a complaint to the Commissioner, says Mirela Fazlić.

Political Pressure

In conversations with representatives of local media in Sandžak, interviewees describe political pressure appearing in several forms—from public targeting and denial of access to events, through “subtle messages” and calls to “tone things down”, to financial pressure (withdrawal of advertisers, results of public funding competitions and inspections). In Sandžak, where the structure of the ruling coalition differs from the rest of Serbia, pressure often comes from several directions simultaneously, so verbal confrontations can evolve into economic and administrative mechanisms.

We have always been under that kind of pressure. For example, the late Zukorlić once pointed at me during a gathering in front of a crowd and said “and you...”, and everyone wondered who he was threatening while the space was closed and I could not leave. Another time he saw that I had placed a recorder on the podium and casually knocked it off with his hand, smashing it to pieces. Those things happened about ten years ago, but recently they do not occur, says Slezović.

On January 26, when we broadcast the first protest live in Novi Pazar, we received several calls from unknown numbers as well as numbers known to us, telling us that we did not need to do this, that we should tone things down, that inspections and the criminal police would be sent to us and that the budget funds we receive through public calls would be reduced, says Enes Radetinac.

Our advertisers have occasionally been subjected to pressure from representatives of the local authorities because they advertise with us. Only a few of them had the courage to say openly that they were being pressured. Rare among them were those who found the courage to say, “They are harassing me” or “They are pressuring your advertisers—do something about it.” Most simply abruptly withdrew their advertisements from our media

outlets. We survived those pressures as well, says Salahudin Fetić.

SLAPP Lawsuits

In the statements of interviewees, lawsuits are described as instruments of long-term pressure and financial exhaustion of newsrooms—often following periods of open attacks or public targeting. Outcomes vary, but the shared impression is that court proceedings consume time, money and energy and are intended to discourage professional journalistic work.

It lasted four years and ended about a year and a half ago after all legal deadlines had expired. A taxi driver in Novi Pazar got into a fight with a passenger who later died. We began investigating—the police statements indicated that everyone mentioned that the taxi driver had been hired by the then deputy mayor, and we reported that. A campaign followed: his father, a lawyer and SNS coordinator in the Zaječar district, called us asking us to remove the article and offering a “denial”. We refused because we had police statements. Then the lawsuits followed—one private lawsuit for defamation in the Basic Court in Novi Pazar, then in the Higher Court, and another under the Law on Public Information in Belgrade. Over the years, all the rulings were in our favor, although the proceedings were prolonged, passed “from judge to judge,” with appeals... almost four years. The last lawsuit, for defamation, which was supposed to be confirmed by the higher court, became time-barred. In order for them not to have to pay the costs, the state ultimately covered all the legal expenses, says Slezović.

What does this look like in practice? If you fall out of favor with the authorities, they will not sue you for the specific issue you criticized them over; instead, they will look for something else. I will give you my own case as a concrete example: in 2019, 2020 and 2021 I had around thirty-six lawsuits from representatives of the ruling party SDP and their officials. They were filed in coordination—by the brother of Rasim Ljajić, by the mayor, the deputy mayor, directors of public institutions and companies. It meant constant travel to Belgrade for hearings, sometimes once a week. In the end all the cases collapsed because they were unfounded, says Fetić.

Media Financing and Operations

In Sandžak, the operations of local newsrooms rely on a combination of project co-financing, advertising and special programmes (seasonal or thematic), but political and market pressure can be felt on every side. The patterns described by interviewees include “turning off the tap”

through public funding competitions and the withdrawal of advertisers, ad hoc support that varies from year to year, and financial uncertainty that complicates staff retention and the development of new formats.

Court cases were followed by “turning off the tap” wherever possible—clients withdraw and funds from public competitions are denied, says Radetinac.

We have had situations where people called us and said: please remove the advertisement, you do not even have to return the money, just remove it, says Fetić.

Even when funds do arrive, the amount and continuity are unpredictable.

The biggest challenge in running our media outlet is the uncertainty of financing. We can secure funds maybe until the end of the year, but when the next year begins—it is a big question mark, says Mileva Malešić.

Media Environment

The media landscape in Sandžak is complex: there is a strong presence of one local television station with significant public funding, alongside several smaller newsrooms with limited resources, as well as periodic tensions between newsrooms, institutions and the public. Interviewees describe an uneven distribution of public funds, different editorial practices and varying levels of solidarity among media outlets.

RTV Novi Pazar holds the record for the amount of public funds received from both the local government and the republic level, says Halilović.

The Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM) regularly monitors the allocation of funds in media project co-financing competitions. During ANEM’s visit to local media newsrooms in Novi Pazar, Saša Mirković pointed out that the city has long been an example of an unacceptable model for distributing funds through project co-financing.

The long-standing and undisguised favoritism toward RTV Novi Pazar by the local government threatens the survival and normal functioning of professional media in this city, which contradicts the purpose of project co-financing that should protect and promote the public interest in information, Mirković emphasized.

I think solidarity is at a very good level, says Fetić.

Another important topic is the relationship between donors and local media—the need for support to be channelled directly, with fewer intermediaries, so that resources reach the newsrooms that cover local issues daily and carry the burden of public information.

Large media can be as large as they want, but local media play a key role. Donors

should communicate directly with local media, because without local media nothing exists, says Radetinac.

CONCLUSION

The media landscape in Sandžak reflects a persistent tension between the public interest and mechanisms of pressure that have evolved from open attacks into more subtle but equally powerful economic and legal instruments. The safety of journalists was rated as “moderate” (an average of 3 out of 5), yet threats, targeting and online harassment repeatedly appear in testimonies, along with occasional incidents in the field. Experiences with institutions are inconsistent: while some police responses are swift, outcomes often remain absent or end outside criminal proceedings, while lengthy court processes and appeals create a perception of ineffective protection. At the same time, access to information is described as slow and overly formal, forcing newsrooms to rely on networks of sources.

Political pressure is most visible when it affects the economic sustainability of media outlets: withdrawal of advertisers, unpredictable results of project-based co-financing competitions and „warnings“ about inspections even before official decisions. Lawsuits—including those identified by interviewees as SLAPP—function as instruments of exhaustion: even when they end in favour of the newsroom, the time and financial costs have a discouraging effect. At the same time, local newsrooms maintain professional standards through „unwritten rules“ of fieldwork, cascading internal notifications after incidents and caution in publishing content that may increase risk. Cooperation with professional organizations remains largely operational and ad hoc. The media environment is characterized by the concentration of public funds in certain outlets, partial transparency in project funding flows and a form of „operational solidarity“ among newsrooms in situations that do not require compromises in editorial policy.

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