

**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 the Media in Eastern Serbia**

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

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## Introduction

Media outlets in small and medium-sized communities in Serbia are facing multilayered pressures that directly affect the safety of journalists, professional standards, and the very survival of editorial offices. In addition to long-standing political polarization, the weakening of institutional protection mechanisms, and economic pressure through the system of project-based co-financing and advertising, local journalists are increasingly working under conditions of open threats, targeting, intimidation, and isolation.

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This report was prepared on the basis of interviews with journalists from Zaječar and Bor: Saša Trifunović (IST Media), Vesna Obrenović (Radio Magnum), Zvonko Damnjanović (Media Center Bor), Dušan Vojvodić (ZA Media), Lazar Ranđelović (Tebra portal), Anđela Risantijević, and Miljko Stojanović (Glas Zaječara). Through their personal experiences, the interviewees spoke about journalist safety, institutional and political pressures, professional challenges, and working conditions in Eastern Serbia.

The experiences of the interviewees show that pressures on local media manifest themselves in various ways: through physical attacks and threats, denial of access to events, withholding of information, as well as insults, labeling, and discreditation campaigns on social media. According to their accounts, police and prosecutorial responses to reported cases are often inconsistent — ranging from the prosecution of attacks to the dismissal of complaints and the relativization of threats.

## General Assessment of Journalists' Safety

The interviewees from Zaječar and Bor assess the level of journalists' safety in their local communities differently, but in most cases the assessments range between grades two and four. Differences in assessment most often depend on the editorial policy of the media outlet, relations with local authorities, and the type of topics they report on.

The lowest ratings are given by journalists who continuously report on politically sensitive topics, corruption, protests, and abuses of power. They point out that safety for critical media is not the same as for media outlets that maintain correct or partnership relations with local administrations: *"For some journalists, safety is a five, but for others it is minus five. Specifically for us, it is minus,"* says Miljko Stojanović, journalist at Glas Zaječara, adding that their newsroom has been facing pressures and open attacks for years.

Some interviewees connect a medium-level safety assessment with the broader social context. *"The safety of journalists today is equal to the safety of other actors in society. That would be somewhere around a three,"* assesses Dušan Vojvodić (ZA Media), explaining the situation through strong social polarization and the absence of adherence to professional standards.

Interviewees from Bor more frequently speak of somewhat more stable circumstances regarding physical safety: *"I'm torn between a three and a four. Compared to Zaječar, Bor is actually fairly decent in that regard,"* says Lazar Ranđelović (Tebra portal), noting that insults and pressures on social media are almost a daily occurrence.

Interviewees from Zaječar more frequently point to a long-standing atmosphere of conflict with local institutions, a breakdown in communication, and the absence of support through project co-financing, while interviewees from Bor more often emphasize "softer" forms of pressure, such as selectively inviting journalists to events or filing complaints through municipal police. The conclusion reached by most interviewees is that journalists' safety in local communities cannot be reduced solely to the absence of physical attacks, but rather includes a broader set of political, economic, and institutional risks.

## Threats, Attacks, and Targeting

The experiences of the interviewees show that threats, attacks, and various forms of targeting of journalists in Zaječar and Bor are present to varying degrees. The forms of pressure range from open physical attacks and death threats to institutional disregard and discreditation campaigns.

The most serious forms of endangerment are described by journalists who have for years critically reported on the work of local authorities. Miljko Stojanović (Glas Zaječara) recounts an attack during coverage of a recent protest.

*“While covering the protest, I approached to film the event when a police officer hit me twice in the chest and shoved me. I fell onto the street, injured my ribs, and lost my phone. When I tried to report the attack to the police chief, he told me: ‘I’ve been tolerating you for ten months,’ and pushed me several times in front of the gathered crowd while some individuals applauded. The third time he shoved me harder, after which police officers with shields pinned me against a door, confiscated my phone, and removed me from the gathering. After that, I ended up at the Emergency Center and reported the case to the police. The duty prosecutor initially classified the incident as torture and abuse of a journalist, but after the prosecutor was replaced, the proceedings were practically halted and the police did not submit the footage of the attack.”*

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In addition to physical attacks, long-term discreditation campaigns are also present. *“They made two films about me — in one they say that I earn a salary of 8,300 euros a month and that I am financed by foreign embassies, that I am destroying the city and the state,”* says Stojanović.

Threats related to reporting have also been recorded in Bor. Saša Trifunović (IST Media) states that after publishing one investigative article, a private businessman threatened him by phone: *“He called me because of the article and threatened me; I even have a recording of that conversation,”* says Trifunović. Although the case was reported, the police response was, according to him, discouraging. *“They told me: ‘Oh, that’s just how he is, he’s crazy, he’s never actually harmed anyone,’”* says Trifunović. Following such a response, he decided not to further insist on prosecuting the case, which directly affected his further work on the topic.

*“After that, I didn’t pursue the story to the very end because I no longer felt comfortable doing so,”* he says, pointing out that the relativization of threats and the absence of an institutional response can lead to self-censorship and journalists withdrawing from sensitive topics.

On social media, insults and labeling have become everyday reality for most interviewees. *“Foreign mercenaries, blockers, Ustaše — that has become the standard,”* says Lazar Randelović (Tebr portal), emphasizing that such content is no longer perceived as exceptional.

Interviewees from Zaječar point more frequently to direct attacks and open targeting, while interviewees from Bor more often speak about institutional restrictions, public accusations, and online pressure. In both cases, threats and pressures affect the sense of personal and professional insecurity and constitute a permanent part of the everyday work of local journalists.

## Institutional Reactions

The experiences of interviewees from Zaječar and Bor show that police and prosecutorial responses to reported attacks, threats, and pressures against journalists are inconsistent and often ineffective. While in some cases the authorities acted in accordance with the law, a larger number of interviewees state that they encountered relativization, delays in proceedings, or a complete absence of institutional protection.

The most drastic example concerns the attack on Miljko Stojanović (Glas Zaječara) while reporting from a protest. After being injured and taken to the Emergency Center, the case was reported to the police and the prosecutor's office. *"The duty prosecutor initially classified the event as torture and abuse of a journalist, but five days later another prosecutor was assigned and from that moment nothing further happened,"* says Stojanović. According to him, the police failed to provide the prosecutor's office with footage of the attack, although, as he states, there are at least two video recordings of the incident.

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A similar experience is described by Anđela Risantijević (Glas Zaječara), who received direct death threats via social media. *"They wrote to me that I would end up like my sister, that worms would eat me,"* she says. Although the case was reported to the Prosecutor's Office for High-Tech Crime, the response was that it did not constitute a "credible threat," and the proceedings were therefore not continued.

The interviewees point out that such an approach by institutions not only fails to provide a sense of protection, but also further discourages journalists from reporting new cases of violence and threats. As a result, some journalists choose to rely, instead of on institutions, on the support of journalists' associations and informal solidarity networks.

Nevertheless, some interviewees also mention exceptions. Dušan Vojvodić (ZA Media) points out that in previous cases of attacks on journalists there were also convictions, and that today the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists plays a certain role in protecting journalists. *"There is willingness to see some cases through to the end, but that depends on many factors and is not the rule,"* he says.

The interviewees assess that the key problem lies in the inconsistency of institutional protection — while a small number of cases are initiated, the majority remain without judicial resolution. Such a situation directly affects journalists' sense of safety, but also contributes to

self-censorship, withdrawal from certain topics, and a reduction in the scope of critical reporting in local communities.

## Protection Strategies and Internal Editorial Protocols

Interviewees from Zaječar and Bor state that most local newsrooms do not have formalized written protocols for handling risky situations, and that protection is mainly based on personal experience, mutual agreements, and risk assessment “on the go.” Nevertheless, different models exist among the interviewees regarding how editorial offices attempt to protect themselves.

ZA Media stands out as an example of a newsroom that, with the support of journalists’ associations, attempted to establish clearer rules for acting in risky situations. Dušan Vojvodić states that assistance and advice regarding safety were primarily obtained through cooperation with the Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia (NUNS), as well as through the activities of the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists.

One of the interviewees states that there is an oral agreement on how to act in risky situations, but that no written document exists. *“We changed our working policy and no longer attend their press conferences, because first they stopped inviting us, and now they invite us only when it suits them,”* emphasizing that avoiding certain events has become a form of self-defense. A similar approach is also applied in another newsroom included in this research, where, according to our interviewees, there are no formal protocols, but journalists rely on personal experience and assessment of the current situation in the field.

In the newsroom of Glas Zaječara, after years of attacks and threats, a different protection model has been established, based on publicity and visibility. Miljko Stojanović states that their primary strategy is to immediately make every form of pressure, threat, or attack public and to inform journalists’ associations about it. According to them, this approach is seen as the only remaining protection mechanism in a situation where institutional protection is absent.

Saša Trifunović (IST Media) points out that his newsroom does not have a special protocol, but that after threats and unpleasant experiences, greater caution is exercised more frequently. *“After those threats, you think more carefully about whether it is worth pursuing a story to the very end, because you realize that you are alone in it,”* says Trifunović, indicating that protection often depends exclusively on personal assessment and willingness to take risks.

## Reporting in Crisis Situations

The riskiest experiences described by our interviewees are connected to reporting from protests. Journalists from Glas Zaječara describe multiple experiences involving violence, pushing, and the use of force during public gatherings. During one protest, Miljko Stojanović was physically assaulted by police officers, ended up at the Emergency Center, and lost the phone he had been using to record the event. Such experiences, as they explain, shape the way they now assess risks and make decisions about going into the field. Saša Trifunović (IST Media) states that even reporting from municipal assembly sessions involved elements of risk. He points out that, after three decades of covering the work of the local assembly, he was for the first time denied entry, with private security explaining that there had been “information about possible disturbances.” Journalists from one of the newsrooms state that they reported from gatherings related to pollution and environmental issues, during which they faced provocations and pressure from organized groups and individuals. Because of such experiences, the newsroom, as they explain, decided to focus more extensively on topics related to environmental protection and civil society, while avoiding high-risk political events.

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## Training, Knowledge, and Capacities for Safe Work

Interviewees from Zaječar and Bor have differing experiences when it comes to safety training, but most state that **they have not undergone systematic or long-term training**, but only occasional short educational programs within individual projects. One media outlet states that they participated in various training sessions organized by journalists’ associations: “*There were offers from Local Press, UNS, NUNS, and we participated in those trainings,*” while another outlet had only one short training session, which, as they say, is insufficient for real crisis situations.

Dušan Vojvodić points out that, in practice, they rely on experience and on the newsroom functioning as a system.

*“I believe that I personally, as well as the team I work with, have enough experience, and that based on that experience we have built a certain system that functions well, because that is actually the whole point — a journalist must not be alone.”*

## Digital Security

The online sphere represents one of the main arenas in which journalists from Zaječar and Bor face pressure and threats. According to the interviewees, attacks most often occur via social media, through insults, targeting, discreditation campaigns, and direct threats.

The interviewees point out that protection mechanisms in the digital sphere are weak — reports to platforms rarely produce results, while the removal of problematic content is often absent or delayed. Because of this, most newsrooms rely on their own judgment, blocking accounts, and publicly pointing out attacks as the only available defense mechanisms.

### **Cooperation with Journalists' Associations and Networks**

The experiences of journalists from Zaječar and Bor with journalists' associations are inconsistent and largely depend on specific situations and personal contacts. For some newsrooms, associations represent an important source of support, while others have completely distanced themselves from formal membership.

One of the media outlets included in the research states that it was the newsroom's policy for journalists to be members of associations and participate in their activities. As they explain, they attended assemblies and training sessions organized by the associations, and they also used this cooperation for education during periods of lower workload. In contrast, another media outlet states that they are effectively no longer part of the associations. Although they have not formally terminated their membership, they say they withdrew after becoming disappointed with the way the organizations functioned and with their priorities.

Saša Trifunović from IST Media draws a distinction between UNS and NUNS, stating that UNS republished their articles about incidents involving the mayor, while NUNS did not, leaving the impression that local media are often secondary unless “something truly dramatic” happens. Journalists from Glas Zaječara speak about a very low level of solidarity among local media outlets, with the exception of certain situations in which attacks were nevertheless jointly covered. As they explain, during previous threats the support they received could be counted “on the fingers of one hand.”

### **Access to Information and Relations with Institutions**

The ways in which newsrooms from Zaječar and Bor obtain information from institutions differ, but in most cases they come down to a combination of personal contacts, telephone conversations, and formal requests.

Some media representatives state that they primarily attempt to obtain information “through the usual channels,” via email or telephone. They rarely use requests for access to information of public importance and, as they say, if they do not receive a response, the matter often ends there.

On the other hand, some emphasize that they use requests under the Law on Free Access to Information precisely when they need a written record. As they explain, they received information properly and, in some cases, published complete documents both on their portal and on social media in order to have official confirmation of the claims made in their articles.

IST Media states that they almost always received responses from institutions. As Saša Trifunović explains, he personally submitted requests at the registry office, received stamped confirmations, and the responses, in most cases, arrived within the prescribed deadlines.

### Political and Economic Pressures

Interviewees from Zaječar and Bor perceive political and economic pressures as inseparable and as one of the key mechanisms of control over local media.

Anđela Risantijević and Miljko Stojanović from Glas Zaječara state that they have been in open conflict with local authorities for years, accompanied by an almost complete breakdown in institutional communication. Representatives of the authorities, as they explain, do not answer questions, do not invite the newsroom to events, and ignore requests for information. According to them, the pressure does not end with the denial of access — it is accompanied by continuous public targeting through discreditation campaigns, accusations of being “foreign mercenaries,” and attempts to portray journalists as political opponents.

*“They made two films about me. In one, they claim that my salary is 8,300 euros a month, that I earn in one month what the citizens of Zaječar earn in a year, that I receive money from foreign embassies, that I am financed by NGOs... They do this through the Zaječarski blok page, for which Veran has information. That page is registered somewhere in Russia or China. We tried a thousand ways to report it, but they have such protection that there is no chance of taking it down. We wrote letters, complaints, everything possible. Those are the most terrifying campaigns. They portrayed me as an alcoholic, and they wrote all sorts of things about Anđela — we have been portrayed as everything imaginable. They do not attack only politicians, they target us as the worst possible enemies,”* says Stojanović.

They also emphasize that they have for years been excluded from local financing through public calls for co-financing media content, which directly affects the stability of the newsroom. As they explain, funds are allocated to media outlets that maintain an “allied” relationship with local authorities, while critical media are systematically excluded.

According to the interviewees, political pressure in Bor manifests itself through public statements by local officials, accusations in the media, and attempts to portray certain newsrooms as politically motivated. Although there are fewer physical attacks than in Zaječar, the atmosphere of pressure is maintained through constant control over access and public labeling.

Economic pressure, according to interviewees from both cities, represents one of the strongest mechanisms of control. In Bor, funds from public competitions are formally available, but several interviewees state that the allocation process is often connected to editorial policy.

An additional problem concerns relations with local advertisers. Journalists state that a large part of the local economy is directly or indirectly connected to the public sector, which is why decisions on advertising are often made in accordance with the political climate. This means that critical media lose not only budgetary support, but also commercial revenues.

### **Local Elections in Negotin – New Incidents and Attacks on Journalists**

After the interviews for this report had been conducted, local elections were held on November 30, 2025, in the municipalities of Negotin, Mionica, and Sečanj. Negotin, which belongs to the Eastern Serbia region, was marked by a series of attacks on and obstruction of journalists covering election day.

The Journalists' Association of Serbia (UNS) announced that a total of seven cases of attacks, obstruction, and intimidation of journalists reporting from the local elections had been recorded in Negotin. One of the most serious incidents occurred when Uglješa Surdučki, a journalist for the student media outlet Blokada info, lost his mobile phone while trying to protect a colleague who had been attacked. An unidentified person approached him from behind and took the phone, which was then, according to his testimony, thrown to the ground and smashed. Surdučki gave a statement to the police, but, as he stated, the authorities did not contact him afterward. In the same attack, NG portal journalist Suzana Mihajlović Jovanović was also injured while attempting to help younger colleagues. She stated that they were pushed, insulted, and told to stop filming, and that one man struck her in the shoulder area, adding that nothing similar had happened to her during more than three decades of journalistic work.

UNS also reported the case of TV Nova S correspondent Katarina Golubović, who in Negotin was obstructed and insulted while preparing for a live broadcast in front of the premises of the SNS. Three individuals approached her, filmed her, intimidated her, and shouted insults, mentioning, among other things, the owner of the media group and the name of the state of Luxembourg, accompanied by derogatory labels.

ANEM particularly highlighted the case of photojournalist Gavriilo Andrić, who was covering the elections in Negotin. According to his own account, a masked individual riding a quad bike stole his phone, while another person pushed him when he attempted to follow the attacker. Citizens later tried to find the attackers, and, according to the report, a group of people emerged from the SNS premises and began beating those present. Police arrived at the scene, but, according to Andrić's testimony, refused to react or begin searching for the phone even though the device could have been located.

In its response, ANEM assessed that the police's failure to act in certain cases was particularly problematic, as was the fact that attacks on journalists continue to recur without an adequate institutional response.

## Conclusion

The experiences of journalists from Zaječar and Bor demonstrate that the safety of local media is a multilayered issue encompassing physical attacks, online targeting, institutional obstruction, political pressure, and economic insecurity. The interviewees testify that these pressures do not occur in isolation, but often overlap and reinforce one another — directly affecting professional work, the sense of personal safety, and the long-term sustainability of newsrooms.

Particularly concerning is the fact that institutional responses are inconsistent and often insufficient, which further weakens journalists' trust in the protection system. In such an environment, the burden of safety is shifted onto the newsrooms themselves, journalists' personal assessments, and the support of journalists' associations and groups.

Although there are examples of solidarity, training, and inter-newsroom support, the interviewees emphasize that these mechanisms are still insufficient to ensure systemic security. Most newsrooms do not have formal protocols for acting in crisis situations, while training opportunities are rare and short-term.

Without systemic protection and political will to sanction attacks on journalists, local media remain exposed to constant pressure that directly endangers citizens' right to accurate, timely, and free information.

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