

# **MONITORING OF THE MEDIA SCENE IN SERBIA**

## **FOR THE MONTH OF MAY 2024**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Monitoring of the media scene is carried out with the aim of continuous monitoring of events and processes affecting the state of media freedom in the Republic of Serbia. The authors of the monitoring deal with: freedom of expression; monitoring the implementation of existing regulations; adopting of new regulations, also by amending and supplementing the current ones - from the field of media as well as from other areas directly or indirectly affecting the freedom of the media; and also by analyzing SLAPP lawsuits (strategic lawsuits against public participation) directed against journalists and media.

Publicly available data, data obtained from journalists, editors and other media workers, journalist associations and media associations, as well as state and non-state bodies are used for monitoring.

## I FREEDOM OF SPEECH

In early May, [Reporters Without Borders](#) published the report "[World Press Freedom Index for 2024 - Journalism under Political Pressure](#)". From last year's 91<sup>st</sup> place, [Serbia](#) fell to 98th place. The Report states that there is quality journalism in Serbia, which has been awarded for its research on crime and corruption. However, it is trapped by rampant fake news and propaganda. Despite the strong legal framework, it is concluded in the Report, journalists are exposed to political pressure, and the crimes committed against them remain unpunished.

A high degree of fragmentation was observed in the media market (it was recorded that more than 2,500 media were registered in Serbia). The independent cable channel N1 and several tabloids stood out as the most influential media, in addition to RTS and other channels with a national frequency.

When it comes to the legislative framework, it was noted that journalists often work in a restrictive environment, and that they show a tendency towards self-censorship. It was pointed out in the Report that the effect of the regulation adopted in 2023 has yet to be evaluated, as well as that the regulations related to the police and the prosecutor's office have already produced positive results in some cases of attacks on journalists. However, the judicial system that deals with the prosecution of assassinations and attacks on journalists, and adjudicates SLAPP proceedings directed against journalists - has yet to prove its independence and effectiveness in protecting media freedom.

In the field of journalists' safety, in addition to the observed efforts to improve it (by forming two working groups for the protection of journalists' safety and introducing an SOS line for media workers), it was noted that journalists in Serbia do not feel protected. The acquittal in the case of the murder of Slavko Ćuruvija was marked as a symbol of impunity for the crimes committed against them.

At the end of May, [the SafeJournalists network](#), [Media Freedom Rapid Response](#) partners and the [Coalition for Media Freedom](#) published a joint statement condemning attacks on journalists in Serbia. It was assessed that the attacks and pressures culminated in a physical attack on journalist Vuk Cvijić and a demand that KRIK and Pištaljka journalists be punished with prison terms. The authorities in Serbia are called upon to treat the increase in attacks on the media as a priority, and to truly devote

themselves to improving the safety of journalists.<sup>1</sup>

During May, at a round table organized by the Independent Association of Journalists of Vojvodina (NDNV), the discussion continued on the topic of whether changes to the Criminal Code would improve the safety of media workers in Serbia. The public debate on the topic of enabling more effective and comprehensive protection of journalists through amendments to the Criminal Code was opened at the end of 2021. Professor of Criminal Law Zoran Stojanović, on the initiative and with the support of the OSCE Mission in Serbia and the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists, drafted amendments to the Criminal Code. The amendments, which later became [the Draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Code](#), provided for the specification and expansion of three existing parts: Coercion (Article 135 of the Criminal Code), Threatening Security (138 of the Criminal Code) and Preventing the Printing and Dissemination of Printed Matters and Broadcasting of Programs (149 CC). The proposed changes to the law opened up a lively public debate. The most criticized was the amendment of Article 149 of the Criminal Code (Prevention of printing and distribution of printed matter and broadcasting of programs), which was characterized as the introduction of an "open delict", like the former "delict of opinion".<sup>2</sup> The draft law was withdrawn from the procedure.

### **The case of the attack on Vuk Cvijić, Radar media journalist**

Vuk Cvijić, an investigative journalist from Radar, was physically attacked on the street in the center of Belgrade. Milan Lađević, one of the co-owners and publishers of the pro-government tabloids Srpski telegraf and Republika.rs, punched him in the chin, he said. Cvijić said that he had known Lađević from before and that he had no personal conflict with him.

Passing by a cafe, he greeted a former colleague with whom Lađević was sitting. Cvijić, as he said, did not even notice Lađević. Before the blow, after which he fell, Lađević insulted him, explained Cvijić, and then got in his face. Cvijić sees a possible reason for the attack in the fact that he wrote articles about former Novi Sad police chief Slobodan Malešić. Lađević was also mentioned in those reports.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [SafeJournalists network, MFRR partners and Coalition for media freedom condemn pressures and attacks on journalists in Serbia](#), announcement published on May 30, 2024 at NUNS portal

<sup>2</sup> [Čuvajte se mišljenja o mišljenju](#), author Slobodan Beljanski, article published on October 21, 2021 at Peščanik portal.

<sup>3</sup> [Novinara Vuka Cvijića fizički napao direktor „Srpskog telegrafa“ \(VIDEO\)](#), report published on May 29, 2024 at Insajder portal.

Immediately after the disputed event, Cvijić contacted Veran Matić, a member of the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists. Arriving at the place of the incident, Matić himself reported the attack to the police.

Expressing solidarity with their colleague, a large number of journalists came to the scene.

The chief public prosecutor of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, Nenad Stefanović, gave the First Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade an order to act. Investigations are ongoing.

Lađević denied that he physically attacked Cvijić. According to him, Cvijić provoked him, after which they started getting in each other's faces. Lađević claims that there was no physical confrontation. When asked how Cvijić fell, Lađević said that he did not know: "I guess he then turned around, did he take a step back, slipped, tripped, fell, I don't even know what he did (...) I am not interested if and why he falls, how he falls and what he falls from. Does he have at least one injury, one bruise, one scratch," Lađević told the Raskrikavanje portal.<sup>4</sup>

Immediately after the attack, the editorial office of the Republika.rs portal published the text "Big scandal: Radar journalist attacked the director of Serbian telegraph".<sup>5</sup> The text claims that Vuk Cvijić verbally attacked Lađević, threatened him and staged that Lađević pushed him.

The attack on Vuk Cvijić was condemned by domestic and international organizations dealing with the issue of protecting freedom of expression. The Coalition for Media Freedom called on citizens to gather and support him. The protest was held on May 31.<sup>6</sup> Teresa Ribeiro, the OSCE Media Freedom representative, [stated](#) on her X account: "The recent attack on the journalist Vuk Cvijić in Serbia is unacceptable. I join the OSCE Mission in Serbia in praising the police and the prosecutor's office for their quick reaction, which should lead to a detailed investigation and to the satisfaction of justice. The attack on Vuk Cvijić was recorded on the [Council of Europe](#) platform.

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<sup>4</sup> [Cvijić: Lađević me udario pesnicom; Lađević: Ne znam kako je pao](#), author Marija Vučić, article published on May 29, 2024 at Raskrikavanje portal.

<sup>5</sup> [VELIKI SKANDAL! NOVINAR RADARA NAPAO DIREKTORA SRPSKOG TELEGRAFA!](#), text published on May 29, 2024 at Republika portal

<sup>6</sup> [Skup podrške novinaru Vuku Cvijiću u Beogradu](#), report published on May 31, 2024 at Radio Free Europe portal

### **The case of Dinko Gruhonjić**

The Serbian Progressive Party in Novi Sad published an announcement "[Dinko Sabahudin Gruhonjić for mayor of the thieves' coalition: Slop](#)". The announcement states that "a coalition gathered for looting Novi Sad and humiliating everything Serbian, for making pubs in churches and glorifying Serbs as a genocidal people." Along with various insults and discredits, Dinko Gruhonjić was labeled as a Serb hater.

"They all joined together in one slurp, similar to the one that an alcoholic throws up after heavy drunkenness from recklessly mixing different drinks. All kinds, cockades and five-pointers, Ustasha and partisans, boycotters and those who wanted the elections, joined together with only one goal - to continue the robbery of the people of Novi Sad, in which we stopped them in 2012," the statement said.

The Independent Association of Journalists of Vojvodina [reacted](#) to those allegations. They presented to the public the view that the statement of the Serbian Progressive Party should be treated as proof that they are behind the organized campaign against Dinko Gruhonjić. In the announcement of the NDNV, allegations about the political involvement of Dinko Gruhonjić and other members of the NDNV were denied.

### **The case of the Inđija Independent Media (IN Media)**

A statement was published on the official accounts of the Municipality of Inđija accusing the IN Media portal of spreading fake news, taking information out of context and fabricating tabloid headlines. The reaction of the local authority followed after IN Media published an article in which it is stated that the citizens of Inđija municipality contacted representatives of the local self-government, through System 48 (the system for reporting communal problems), a total of three times, while from other populated areas of the municipality of Inđija no one even addressed the authorities. In its text, the portal IN Media mentions the source of the data - the official website of the Municipality of Inđija.<sup>7</sup> After the Municipality published a statement, the IN Media portal reacted with a text in which it reminded that the ruling party has repeatedly used its accounts on social networks to put pressure

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<sup>7</sup> [Lokalna SNS vlast opet napada novinare IN Medija](#), article published on May 20, 2024 at IN Media portal

on them. They see the fact that the IN Media portal persistently points to the wrong decisions made by the leaders of the Municipality of Inđija as a reason for making unfounded accusations against them. They referred readers to the information that the local government refuses to send them invitations to events, including sessions of the local parliament.

It is important to remember that Verica Marinčić, the owner and editor-in-chief of the IN Media portal, was personally exposed to pressure for years. In the [Monitoring of the media scene for the month of March 2024](#), an event was described in detail when she was pushed out of the premises of the Municipality of Inđija, while she was reporting on the protest organized by the residents of Čortanovaci due to the abolition of the railway station. The most severe form of violence she encountered, she said, was the vandalism of her mother's tombstone.<sup>8</sup>

### **The case of Ozon Press Media**

The portal Glas Zapadna Srbije (GZS – The Voice of Western Serbia), in the framework of the unsigned article "40,000 was paid to Ozone Media from Čačak from the European Fund for Democracy", published the bank documentation of the Ozone Press media, which never gave its consent for the publication of the document. It is not known how the GZS portal obtained the document, which is a business secret.<sup>9</sup> The editors of the GZS portal hid only certain information - the description of the transaction and the user's IBAN, but the parts containing the signature of the Ozon Media editor-in-chief, information on the amount received by that media and the date when the payment was made, were separately highlighted in the article. The Informer tabloid also published the bank documentation [without concealing any data](#).

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<sup>8</sup> [Onda su krenuli na pokojnike](#), author Branko Čečen, article published on March 30, 2024 at Bezbedni novinari portal

<sup>9</sup> [Prorežimski mediji objavili poverljivu bankarsku dokumentaciju Ozon pressa](#), author Stefan Kosanović, report published on May 30, 2024 at Raskrikavanje portal.

## II MONITORING OF THE PROCESS OF ADOPTION OF NEW LAWS

At the beginning of May, the Council of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) adopted 15 by-laws. [The Report](#) on the Public Debate was published on the Ministry's website. You can read more about the public discussion regarding the adoption of the regulations under the competence of REM in [the Monitoring of the media scene for the month of April](#).

Proposals submitted by media organizations, as well as organizations that focus on human rights, encouraging the development of democracy and civil society (more on that in last month's monitoring report) - were not accepted.

In the first half of May, the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications [announced](#) that 42 local self-government units did not announce a public tender in accordance with the Law on Public Information and Media. It was said in the announcement that certain units of local self-government (Belgrade was cited as an example) - did not have grounds to announce a public tender within the legal term because they are in the regime of temporary financing. The announcement stated that the Ministry has sent letters to all local self-government units (which are in the regime of regular financing and have not announced a public tender so far) to announce the tender without delay, and to inform them of their actions.

### III IMPLEMENTATION OF EXISTING LAWS

In the second half of May, the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications [announced](#) decisions on the formation of commissions for tenders announced in the field of public information. Along with the solutions, ranking lists and point lists for evaluating the biographies of candidates registered for committee members were also published. Committee members have the role of reviewing and evaluating the submitted projects and making a ranking list. Based on the ranking list, the members of the commissions prepare a proposal for the distribution of funds, and submit that proposal to the Minister of Information and Telecommunications.

The Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia (NUNS) analyzed the documentation published by the Ministry. It turned out that a larger number of experts sent their CV to more calls. NUNS stated that the criteria on the basis of which the Ministry resolved the issue of selecting members for commissions were not clear. It was observed that a number of candidates who had more points did not find themselves in the commissions, unlike others who, although with less points, were selected.<sup>10</sup> NUNS asked the Ministry to answer which principle guided them, and they received the following answer:

*After the formation of the ranking list, it was determined that certain candidates, if they were appointed, would participate in the work of three or more commissions, which was not the intention when drafting the regulations. We considered that appointing the same persons to several commissions would significantly affect the regularity of the entire project co-financing procedure, and consciously resorted to a solution that is more expedient in the given circumstances. For the aforementioned reasons, the drafting of the decision on the appointment of commission members was started, taking care not to appoint the same persons to two competition commissions. During the appointment, care was also taken to ensure that candidates who have already been appointed to a committee give their place to the regular candidate who has the highest number of points and has not been appointed until then.<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> [Zbrka zbog propusta u regulativi ili „muljanje“ u vezi sa imenovanjem članova komisija na konkursima Ministarstva informisanja?](#), author Ivana Kragulj, article published on May 31, 2024 at NUNS portal

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



#### IV SLAPP LAWSUITS DIRECTED AGAINST JOURNALISTS AND THE MEDIA

##### **Criminal proceedings against Snežana Đurić, journalist of the Pištaljka (Whistle) portal**

Journalist Snežana Đurić received a private criminal complaint for reporting on irregularities in the management of the Serbian Rowing Federation. The lawsuit was filed by Vladimir Antić, general secretary of the Serbian Rowing Federation. According to the information published by the Pištaljka portal, Vladimir Antić, referring to the fact that his photo was published in the report, in a private criminal complaint filed for the alleged commission of the criminal offense Unauthorized publication and display of other people's files, portraits and videos - proposed to impose a prison sentence for Snežana Đurić in duration of two years. The Pištaljka portal clarified that the photo was taken from and attributed to the official website of the Serbian Rowing Federation. The lawsuit demanded that the journalist be convicted of the criminal offense of Insult, and pay a fine in the amount of 450,000 dinars. The prosecutor also demanded compensation for non-material damage due to injury to honor and reputation in the amount of 200,000 dinars.

The Pištaljka portal points out that none of the statements from the article have been denied in the lawsuit. The first hearing is scheduled for September. Journalists perceive this lawsuit, as well as the [previous ones](#) that Antić filed against them, as intimidation and pressure on journalists so that they do not write about the business of a sports association that is financed by citizens' money.<sup>12</sup>

Journalist associations strongly criticized this move by the general secretary of the Serbian Rowing Federation. They judged the lawsuit to have several characteristics of a SLAPP:

*We believe that such lawsuits show more characteristics of SLAPP lawsuits, which aim to intimidate and put pressure on journalists, so that they do not write about the business of a sports association that is funded by citizens' money. Due to the fact that Serbian citizens' money is being spent, reporting on this topic is of public interest because citizens have the right to know how that money is being spent.*

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<sup>12</sup> [Generalni sekretar Veslačkog saveza Srbije Vladimir Antić traži dve godine zatvora za novinarku Pištaljke](#), article published on May 27, 2024 at Pištaljka portal

### **Criminal and civil proceedings against Bojana Pavlović and Stevan Dojčinović, journalist and editor-in-chief of the KRIK investigative portal**

Investigative portal KRIK informed the public that the judge of the Appellate Court in Belgrade, Dušanka Đorđević, and her husband, a lawyer by profession, filed two lawsuits against their journalists - criminal and civil. Lawsuits were filed due to data published in the "[Judge Who Judges](#)" database, which has been maintained by KRIK journalists since 2020.

With the lawsuit in civil proceedings, the plaintiffs requested compensation for non-material damages due to the alleged violation of the right to privacy, removal of data and prohibition of re-publication thereof. The criminal complaint, filed for the alleged commission of the criminal offense Unauthorized collection of personal data, requested that the journalist and the editor-in-chief be sentenced to a prison sentence of ten months each, as well as a security measure - a ban on journalistic work for a period of two years each.

As the portal KRIK stated in the article, the lawsuit claims that journalists "draw a target" on the judge and help criminals find her. In the text, they also quoted a part of the lawsuit, and it reads: "The defendants of this kind of publication of data, which is prohibited by our law, are calling for a public lynching of those judges who fight every day to remove members of organized crime from our society, and at the same time to label them and draw targets on them and their families so that members of organized crime can clearly and easily identify and find them".

KRIK assessed this procedure as unprecedented pressure on the work of the media and an attempt to prohibit journalists from reporting on the work and integrity of judges. The editor of the KRIK portal stated: "This is perhaps the biggest pressure on KRIK so far, but these lawsuits indirectly threaten all other media in Serbia. A high-ranking judge is suing us and claims that we were not even allowed to publish her name, so we are now put in a position to defend not only our work in court, but also the legal right of journalists to write about those who exercise power".<sup>13</sup>

The "Judge Who Judges" database was [awarded](#) in 2021 with the global journalism "[Sigma](#)" award. The international jury pointed out that "judges, their deeds and wealth are some of the best-kept secrets in Serbian society", as well as that KRIK, through persistent reporting, managed to show what

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

is hidden behind controversial decisions that have affected citizens over the past decades.

KRIK portal journalists explained that the database contains data from public registers, as well as data that can be obtained by submitting a request for free access to information of public importance. The base was launched with the aim of increasing the transparency of the judiciary in Serbia. The profiles of the judges (of which there are currently 51) contain information about their career, the most important cases in which they acted, the procedures that were conducted against them, as well as the assets they own. There is no information in the database that could endanger the safety of judges or their family members in any way.<sup>14</sup>

The editorial staff of the KRIK portal has been under various types of pressure since its inception. In addition to the large number of lawsuits with SLAPP features filed against them, discrediting campaigns are being conducted against KRIK journalists in the pro-regime tabloid media. Such campaigns were led by several representatives of the government. The apartments of KRIK journalists were ransacked. One of the journalists had her equipment taken away. There are strong indications that the state Security Intelligence Agency (BIA) followed and eavesdropped on the KRIK editor-in-chief, and provided a tabloid with information from his private and business life without authorization. Insults and threats via the Internet accompany the publication of almost every one of their investigations on members of the government in Serbia.

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<sup>14</sup> [Sudija tužila KRIK, traži zatvor za novinare i zabranu rada](#), author Jelena Radivojević, article published on May 30, 2024 at KRIK portal