



BEZBEDNI NOVINARI

Quarterly report for the period April-June 2024

Permanent Working Group for Safety of Journalists

The Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists (PWG), established in January 2017, consists of the representatives of the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office (SPPO), the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia (Mol), Journalists' Association of Serbia (UNS), Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS), Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV), Association of Media (AM), Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM) and Association of Online Media (AOM). The OSCE

Data on the assaults against journalists for the period April-June 2024

In the second quarter of 2024, 14 cases were filed in all public prosecutor's offices in Serbia with regards to complaints for endangering the safety of journalists, which is six cases less than in the previous quarter. Six cases were filed in April, three in May and five in June.

In the recorded events, 13 journalists were the injured parties, of which 10 were male (71.5%), three were female (21.5%), while in one recorded case (7%), the editorial office of one media outlet was the injured party (N1).

Cases before the Special Public Prosecution Office for High-Tech Crime (HTC) continue to dominate, similar to the previous period. However, the percentage of cases before the HTC has decreased in this period, while the one before other prosecutor's offices has increased- eight cases are under the jurisdiction of the HTC (57.2%), while three cases (21.4%) are under the Appellate Public Prosecution (APP) jurisdiction in Belgrade and Novi Sad, respectively. In the previous quarter, in the period from January to April, 70% of cases were under the HTC jurisdiction. This data indicates a shift in the assaults against journalists, from the virtual to the offline sphere.



Tatjana Vasiljević Veljković, representative of the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office at the PWG meeting

Also, as in the previous period, the most common form of assault against journalists is threats, i.e. the complaints for criminal offence of Endangering safety - 9 cases, or 64.3%. Other cases refer to harassment (1), insults (1), insults and threats (1), physical assault (2).

In this quarter, reported physical assaults related to the journalist of Radar, Vuk Cvijić, who was attacked on the street in Belgrade on May 29 by Milan Ladević, the director of the daily newspaper Srpski telegraf, and to the journalist of Danas and Cenolovka, Uglješa Bokić, during election day on June 2. Both cases were discussed in detail at the regular PWG meeting held in June.

Since the beginning of 2024, 34 cases have been filed in all prosecutor's offices in Serbia. By the end of June, first-instance or final decisions were passed in four cases, which represents 11.76% of the cases filed in this period:

- A guilty verdict was pronounced on May 26 in the case of threats to Igor Božić, from February 2024. The verdict - a suspended sentence of 1 year in prison with a probationary period of 3 years - was pronounced on the basis of the concluded plea bargaining agreement.
- In two cases, a decision was rendered to dismiss the criminal charges. On April 26, the APP in Belgrade rejected as unfounded the objection of the injured party, Vanja Đurić (N1), and on April 29, the Basic Public Prosecution - Stara Pazova dismissed the criminal complaint of Gordana Momčilović Ilić, a journalist from this city.
- In one case, an official note was pronounced that there was no criminal offence (against the injured party, Dušan Mladenović).

All other cases from 2024 are pending, and by the end of June, the competent prosecutor's offices have taken the following actions:

- In two cases, proceedings are pending before the court based on the indictment of the public prosecutor. Both cases refer to the injured party Ana Lalić Hegediš from Novi Sad and are under the jurisdiction of the HTC. In one case, after the indictment was filed, the court extended the imposed restraining order - prohibiting the defendant from leaving their apartment.
- In one case before the Basic Public Prosecution Leskovac for five injured journalists of the Internet portal Rešetka from Leskovac, the institute of delaying criminal prosecution against the suspect is pending.
- In 27 cases, either a request for the collection of the necessary information has been filed or an evidence-gathering procedure is underway. In one of these cases (with the injured party Zorka Đukanović, RTS), detention was ordered for the suspect and an order for a psychiatric examination was pronounced.



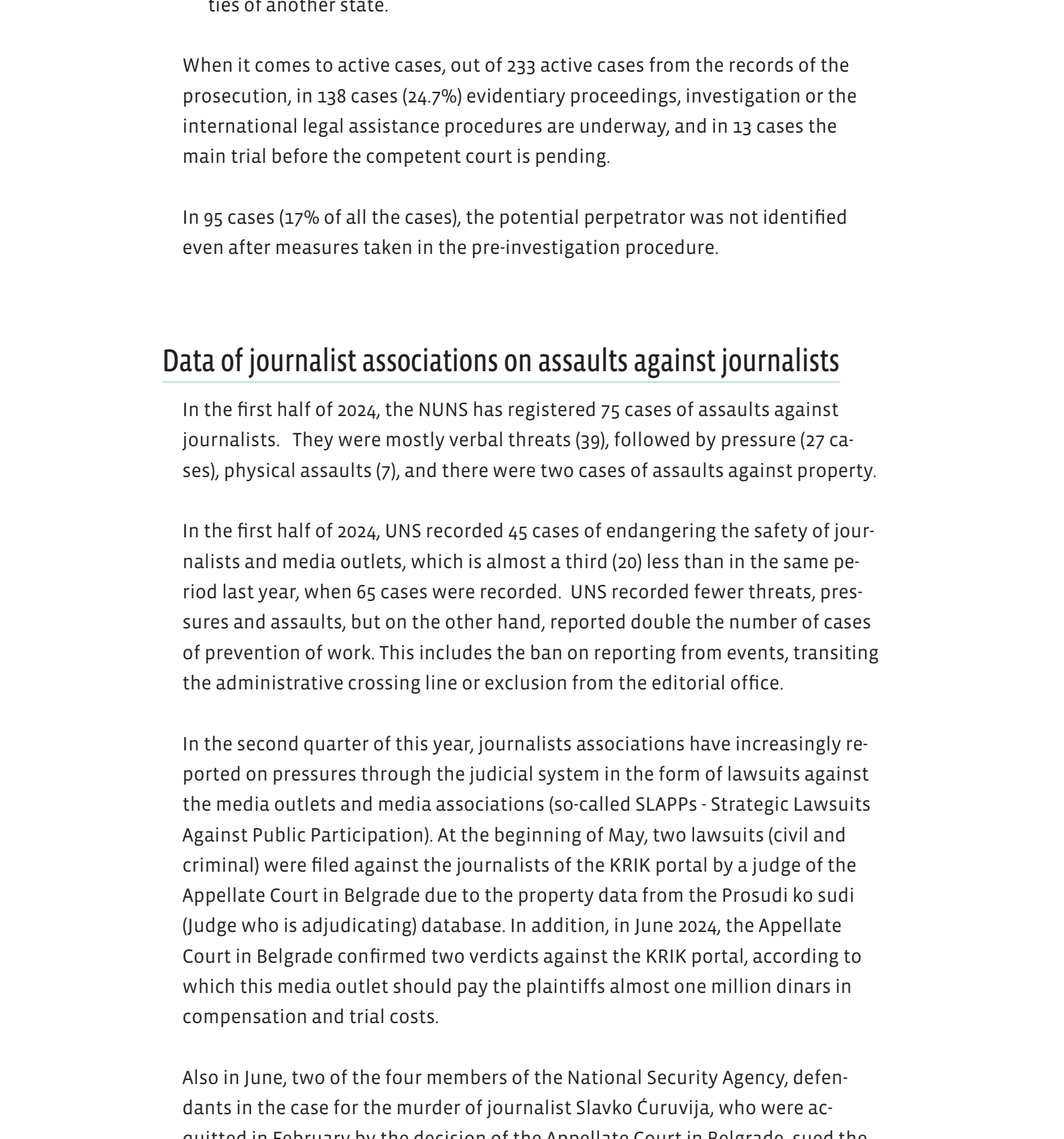
PWG meeting with journalists and representatives of the prosecution and police in Zrenjanin

Conviction for setting on fire the house of Milan Jovanović

In the second quarter of 2024, the case for setting on fire the house of Milan Jovanović, a journalist of the Zig-info portal from Grocka, was finally resolved, from the 2018 records of the prosecution.

After more than five years of court proceedings, the Court of Appeal in Belgrade has passed a final conviction on April 9, 2024, declaring the four defendants guilty of the criminal offence Causing General Danger under Article 278 of the Criminal Code. The defendant, former president of the Municipality of Grocka, Dragoljub Simonović, as well as Aleksandar Marinković, the immediate perpetrator, were sentenced to four years in prison and a fine of 100,000 dinars each. The defendant, former Mol member Vladimir Mihalović, was sentenced to three years in prison and a fine of 100,000 dinars, while the defendant Igor Novaković was sentenced to two years and six months in prison.

Although the prison sentences imposed in the two first-instance proceedings were reduced in the final verdict, the verdict is of great importance for improving the safety of journalists because it represents a clear message that violence against journalists is still punishable. Setting on fire the house of Milan Jovanović is the most drastic form of jeopardizing the safety of journalists after the cases of murders of journalists Slavko Čuruvija, Milan Pantić and Dada Vujasinović and setting the bombs on the window of journalist Dejan Anastasijević in 2007, which are still unsolved.



Members of PWG at the commemoration of 23 years since the murder of journalist Milan Pantić in Jagodina

SPPO Data on the assaults against journalists from 2016 to June 2024

Since the establishment of the SPPO records of criminal acts committed against journalists and media professionals in 2016, until the end of June 2024, 559 cases have been filed in public prosecutor's offices in Serbia with regard to 623 injured editorial offices and journalists, or 521 individuals, of which 317 are male (60.84%), and 204 are female (39.16%).

Out of the total number of cases, a first-instance or final decision was rendered in 326 cases, which represents 58.32% of the total number of cases.

In 91 cases (16.3%) a form of criminal sanction has been imposed so far or the prosecution has been transferred to a foreign country:

- In 69 cases a guilty verdict was pronounced;
- In 21 cases, the perpetrator was sanctioned by the imposition of the obligation prescribed by the Criminal Procedure Code regarding delayed criminal prosecution (principle of opportunity);
- In one case, a diversion measure was imposed against a juvenile offender.

In 17 cases (3%), the court rejected or dismissed the indictment or acquitted the defendant.

About 21.3% of cases were finally resolved by the decision of the prosecutor's office:

- In 114 cases, a decision was rendered to dismiss the criminal charges;
- In 102 cases an official note was rendered that there was no basis for initiating criminal proceedings;
- In 2 cases, a decision was rendered that there was no basis for initiating preparatory proceedings against juvenile offenders;
- In 1 case, the criminal prosecution was transferred to the competent authorities of another state.

When it comes to active cases, out of 233 active cases from the records of the international legal assistance procedures are underway, and in 13 cases the main trial before the competent court is pending.

In 95 cases (17% of all the cases), the potential perpetrator was not identified even after measures taken in the pre-investigation procedure.

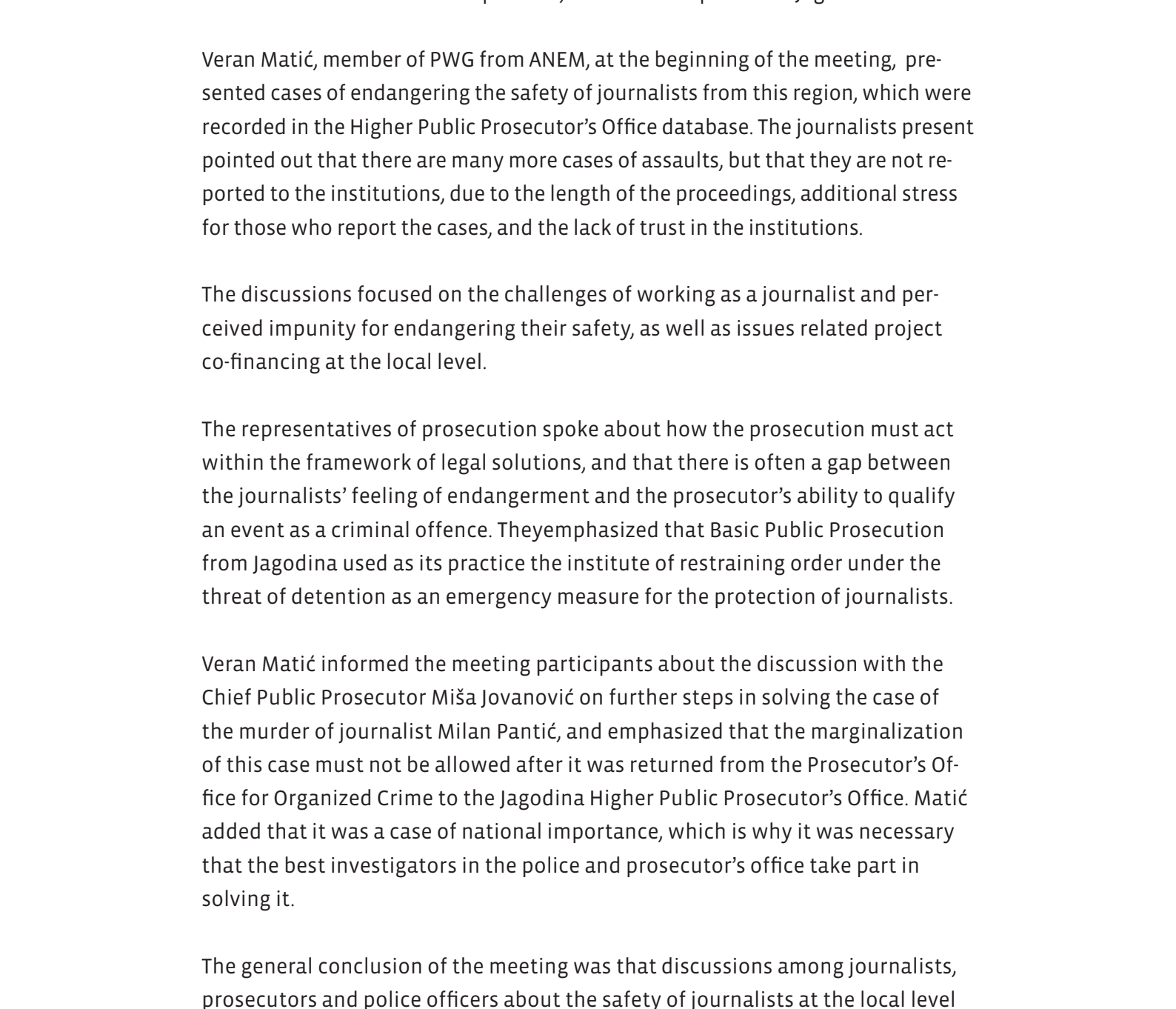
Data of journalist associations on assaults against journalists

In the first half of 2024, the NUNS has registered 75 cases of assaults against journalists. They were mostly verbal threats (99), followed by pressure (27 cases), physical assaults (7), and there were two cases of assaults against property.

In the first half of 2024, UNS recorded 45 cases of endangering the safety of journalists and media outlets, which is almost a third (20) less than in the same period last year, when 65 cases were recorded. UNS recorded fewer threats, pressures and assaults, but on the other hand, reported double the number of cases of prevention of work. This includes the ban on reporting from events, transiting the administrative crossing line or exclusion from the editorial office.

In the second quarter of this year, journalists associations have increasingly reported on pressures through the judicial system in the form of lawsuits against the media outlets and media associations (so-called SLAPPS - Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation). At the beginning of May, two lawsuits (civil and criminal) were filed against the journalists of the KRiK portal by a judge of the Appellate Court in Belgrade due to the property data from the Prosudni ko sud (Judge who is adjudicating) database. In addition, in June 2024, the Appellate Court in Belgrade confirmed two verdicts against the KRiK portal, according to which this media outlet should pay the plaintiffs almost one million dinars in compensation and trial costs.

Also in June, two of the four members of the National Security Agency, defendants in the case for the murder of journalist Slavko Čuruvija, who were acquitted in February by the decision of the Appellate Court in Belgrade, sued the Slavko Čuruvija Foundation for a statement in which it expressed its disapproval of the verdict. The Coalition for Media Freedom condemned the filing of lawsuits, considering it a pressure on freedom of speech.



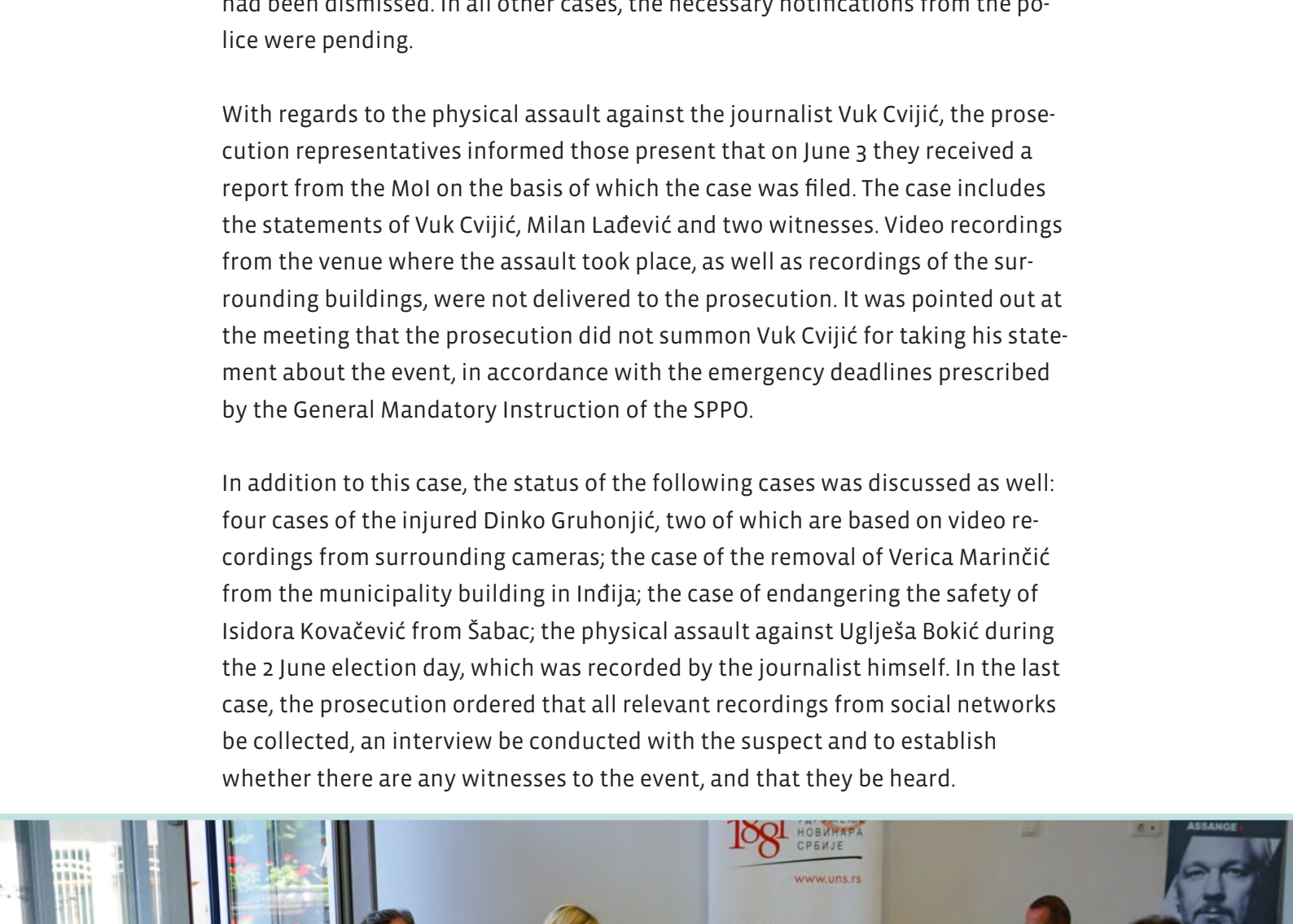
Members of PWG Bekir Dudic, Veran Matic and Kruna Savovic at the regular meeting held in June in the UNS premises

PWG meeting in Novi Sad

The PWG continued the practice of organizing meetings at the local level with media professionals and local contact points from the police and prosecutor's office in the second quarter of 2024, by visiting Novi Sad and Jagodina.

The escalation of grave threats and endangering the safety of journalists in Novi Sad, Indija, Sombor and Stara Pazova was the reason for organizing a meeting in Novi Sad on April 19 at the premises of the NDNV. The meeting was attended by local contact points from the prosecution and the police, and journalists who experienced threats and violence in these cities.

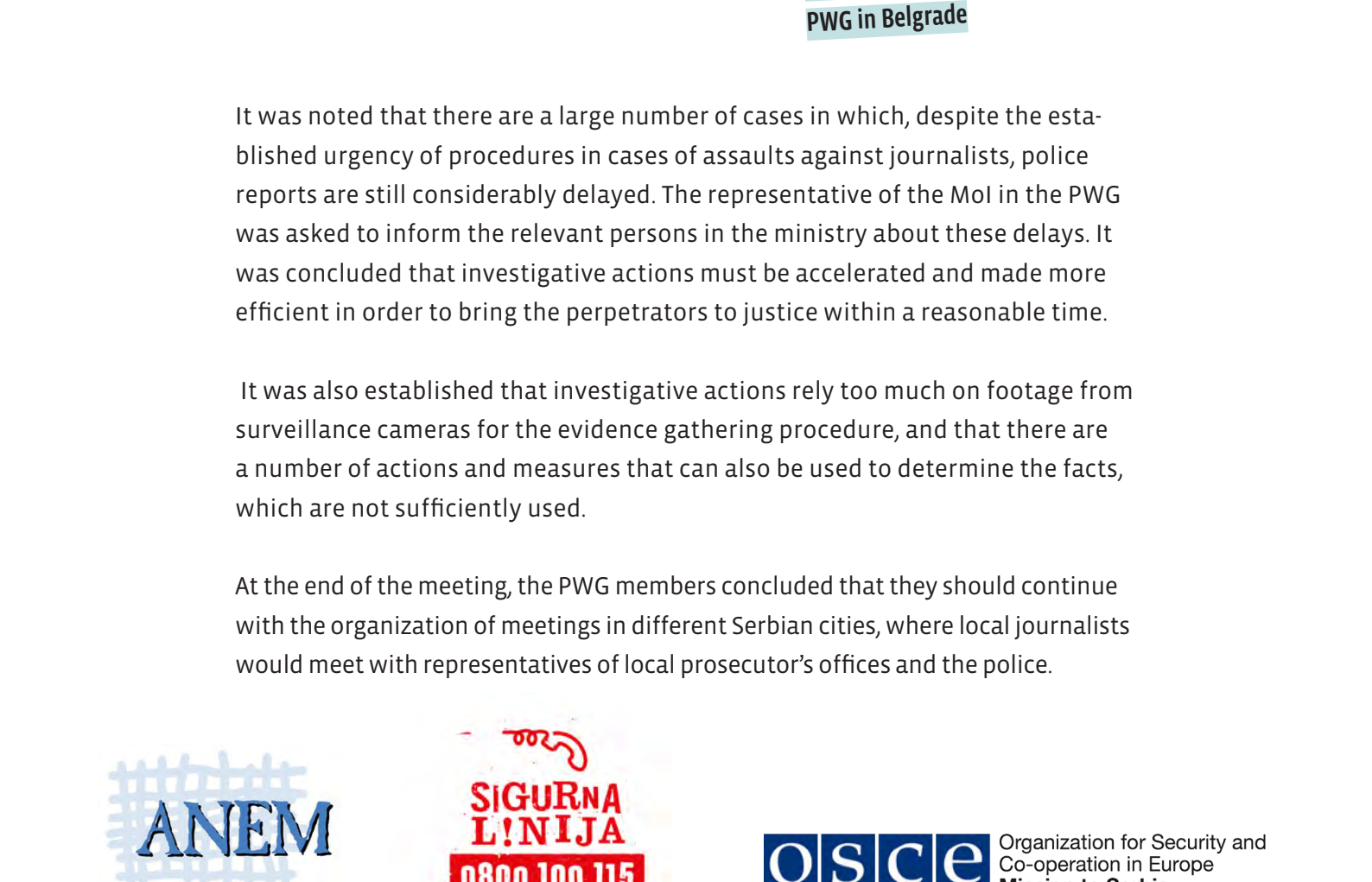
PWG member Veran Matic pointed out that the police, despite promises, did not conduct a security assessment for NDNV president Ana Lalić and programme director of that association, university professor Dinko Gruhonjić. Due to the lack of the security assessment, the European Federation of Journalists funded their private security.



Dinko Gruhonjić gives a statement to the media after the PWG meeting in Novi Sad

Ana Lalić Hegediš addressed the participants via video link, from the location to which she was moved for personal safety, and talked about the traumatic experience she suffered due to her publicly expressed views at the Rebedu festival in Dubrovnik. Beside her, journalists who were victims of assaults and violence in the previous period spoke about their experiences - Verica Marinić from Indija; Gordana Momčilović Ilić from Stara Pazova, who experienced a direct death threat while reporting on illegal construction in a park; Ksenija Pavkov, who became the target of a Telegram account with over 80,000 members. The editor of the SOInfo portal, Sava Majstorov from Sombor, talked about his experiences and a hacker attack on its website, due to which communication with readers was interrupted for a week.

The meeting emphasized the importance of providing psychological support to journalists due to the traumas they endure.



PWG meeting with journalists and representatives of the prosecution and police in Novi Sad

Meeting of the PWG in Jagodina

As part of the commemoration of 23 years since the murder of journalist Milan Pantić, on June 12, a PWG meeting was held in Jagodina with journalists from the Pomoravski district, and the contact points from the Basic Public Prosecution and Higher Public Prosecution from Jagodina, Basic Public Prosecution Paraćin, Basic Public Prosecution Despotovac, and Police Department Jagodina.

Veran Matic, member of PWG from ANEM, at the beginning of the meeting, presented cases of endangering the safety of journalists from this region, which were recorded in the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office database. The journalists present pointed out that there are many more cases of assaults, but that they are not reported to the institutions, due to the length of the proceedings, additional stress for those who report the cases, and the lack of trust in the institutions.

The discussions focused on the challenges of working as a journalist and perceived impunity for endangering their safety, as well as issues related project co-financing at the local level.

The representatives of prosecution spoke about how the prosecution must act within the framework of legal solutions, and that there is often a gap between the journalists' feeling of endangerment and the prosecutor's ability to qualify an event as a criminal offence. They emphasized that Basic Public Prosecution from Jagodina used as its practice the institute of restraining order under the threat of detention as an emergency measure for the protection of journalists.

Veran Matic informed the meeting participants about the discussion with the Chief Public Prosecutor Miša Jovanović on further steps in solving the case of the murder of journalist Milan Pantić, and emphasized that the marginalization of this case must not be allowed after it was removed from the Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime to the Jagodina Higher Public Prosecutor's Office. Matic added that it was a case of national importance, which is why it was necessary that the best investigators in the police and prosecutor's office take part in solving it.

The general conclusion of the meeting was that discussions among journalists, prosecutors and police officers about the safety of journalists at the local level are very important, because besides getting to know each other, the exchange of experiences also enables the establishment of a higher degree of trust, and therefore more efficient work on protecting the safety of journalists.

Sastanak SRG sa novinarima i predstavnicima tužilaštva i policije u Jagodini

Regular Meeting of the PWG

A regular session of the PWG was held at the beginning of June, where current cases of assaults against journalists, endangering their safety, and threats were discussed. PWG members were informed that in the previous period, two indictments had been filed (both for the injured party, Ana Lalić Hegediš), and that criminal charges for the injured party Gordana Momčilović Ilić in Stara Pazova had been dismissed. In all other cases, the necessary notifications from the police were pending.

With regards to the physical assault against the journalist Vuk Cvijić, the prosecution representatives informed those present that on June 3 they received a report from the Mol on the basis of which a case was filed. The case includes the statements of Vuk Cvijić, Milan Ladević and two witnesses. Video recordings from the venue where the assault took place, as well as recordings of the surrounding buildings, were not delivered to the prosecution. It was pointed out at the meeting that the prosecution did not summon Vuk Cvijić for taking his statement about the event, in accordance with the emergency deadlines prescribed by the General Mandatory Instruction of the SPPO.

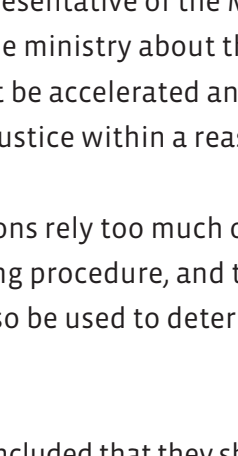
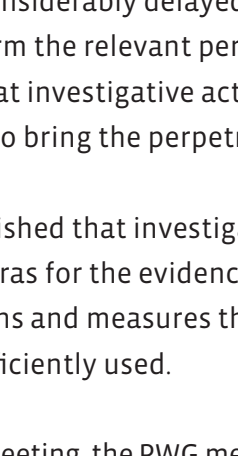
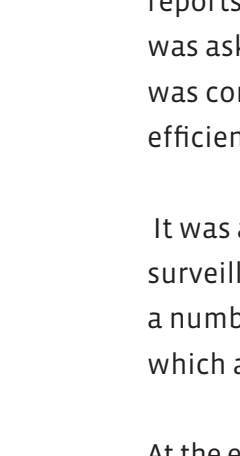
In addition to this case, the status of the following cases was discussed as well: four cases of the injured Dinko Gruhonjić, two of which are based on video recordings from surrounding cameras; the case of the removal of Verica Marinić from the municipality building in Indija; the case of endangering the safety of Sidora Kovačević from Sabac; the physical assault against Uglješa Bokić during the 2 June election day, which was recorded by the journalist himself. In the last case, the prosecution ordered that all relevant recordings from social networks be collected, an interview be conducted with the suspect and to establish whether there are any witnesses to the event, and that they be heard.

Discussion at the regular meeting of the PWG in Belgrade

It was noted that there are a large number of cases in which, despite the established urgency of procedures in cases of assaults against journalists, police reports are still considerably delayed. The representative of the Mol in the PWG was asked to inform the relevant persons in the ministry about these delays. It was concluded that investigative actions must be accelerated and made more efficient in order to bring the perpetrators to justice within a reasonable time.

It was also established that investigative actions rely too much on footage from surveillance cameras for the evidence gathering procedure, and that there are a number of actions and measures that can also be used to determine the facts, which are not sufficiently used.

At the end of the meeting, the PWG members concluded that they should continue with the organization of meetings in different Serbian cities, where local journalists would meet with representatives of local prosecutor's offices and the police.



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