

A SPIRAL OF VIOLENCE AGAINST JOURNALISTS

SERBIA'S ENDURING
MEDIA FREEDOM CRISIS



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The **Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR)** tracks, monitors, and reacts to violations of press and media freedom in EU Member States and Candidate Countries. This project provides legal and practical support, public advocacy, and information to protect journalists and media workers.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANN	Adria News Network
ANS	Association of Journalists of Serbia
BIRN	Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
MapMF	Mapping Media Freedom platform
MFRR	Media Freedom Rapid Response
NUNS	Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia
OCCRP	Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project
REM	Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media
RSF	Reporters Without Borders
RT	Russia Today
RTS	Radio Television of Serbia
RTV	Radio Television of Vojvodina
SLAPP	Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation
SNS	Serbian Progressive Party



People fill the streets near the train station before observing 16 minutes of silence for the victims on the first anniversary of the disaster that killed 16 people, in Novi Sad, Serbia, 1 November 2025.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Media freedom in Serbia remains trapped in a downward spiral amidst record levels of physical violence against journalists, death threats and online smear campaigns, alarming levels of impunity, and tight political control over the media landscape.

Since November 2024, following the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy which triggered the outbreak of the largest protests in Serbia's history, the safety of journalists in Serbia has deteriorated at an alarming pace. Serbia recorded the [highest number](#) of documented incidents (209 alerts) on the Mapping Media Freedom (MapMF) platform for 2025.

Nationwide protests and the state's heavy-handed response have fuelled an unprecedented level of violence against journalists covering demonstrations, including intimidations, physical attacks, and obstruction while carrying out their work. Over the past year, the situation has continued to deteriorate, leaving the country in a prolonged and worsening press freedom crisis.

The institutional response to this crisis has been deeply inadequate. Law enforcement authorities have not only failed to ensure journalists' safety, but police officers have also increasingly acted as perpetrators, carrying out direct attacks on journalists during protests and failing to intervene when journalists were targeted. Although the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office [reported](#) a 367% increase in physical attacks against journalists in 2025 compared to 2024, judicial authorities have secured only three convictions related to criminal attacks on journalists.

Faced with the skyrocketing number of attacks and threats against the press, institutional mechanisms designed to protect journalists have become dysfunctional. State officials have failed to take coordinated action and have not recognised the severity of the situation, leaving the risk of further escalation of attacks against journalists dangerously high.

Media pluralism and editorial independence in Serbia, meanwhile, remain under severe pressure. The government continues to influence the media environment, while exerting sustained pressure on independent outlets and contributing to declining pluralism. Ongoing media acquisitions by the majority state-owned Telekom Srbija have further exacerbated editorial independence.

One of the clearest indicators of the systemic crisis in Serbia's media landscape is the prolonged dysfunction of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) Council. Multiple attempts to appoint Council members have failed, despite efforts by the international community to support a transparent and functional selection process.

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) continue to represent one of the most significant mechanisms used to suppress independent journalism in Serbia. Nevertheless, journalists and civil society actors have demonstrated notable resilience, building strong networks of solidarity and support in response to mounting pressure. While defamation was decriminalised in 2013, insult remains a criminal offence under Serbia's Criminal Code. The criminalisation of insult is an unjustified measure that infringes upon freedom of opinion, which, unlike freedom of expression, cannot be subject to any restriction, and stifles the free work of journalists.

The media freedom mission to Belgrade on 26–27 March 2026 identified a profound lack of trust among journalists and civil society actors towards the government and public institutions. Discussions with media representatives consistently reflected deep scepticism about whether genuine political will exists to address the ongoing media freedom crisis. In this context, calls for stronger engagement by the EU and other international partners have intensified. The EU is widely perceived as the key external actor capable of exerting meaningful pressure on the Serbian authorities to improve the protection of journalists and uphold media freedom standards. These developments have weakened confidence among the international community in the prospects for constructive engagement with the government on media freedom issues.

BACKGROUND

This report was prepared by the partner organisations of the Council of Europe's [Safety of Journalists Platform](#) and [Media Freedom Rapid Response](#) (MFRR) and follows a media freedom mission to Belgrade on 26–27 March 2026.

ARTICLE 19 Europe led the mission and was joined by the following international organisations: Association of European Journalists (AEJ); European Broadcasting Union (EBU); European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF); European Federation of Journalists (EFJ); International Press Institute (IPI); Reporters Without Borders (RSF); Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT); Index on Censorship; and Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). The local partner was the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS).

Organisers arranged the mission to Belgrade amid the largest protests in Serbia's history, intense societal polarisation, and a sharp increase in attacks against journalists. The visit was a follow-up to a [previous MFRR solidarity mission](#) to Serbia in April 2025. The 2026 media freedom mission sought to assess the climate for media freedom, media pluralism, and the safety of journalists, among other issues. The delegation notes that, following the 2026 mission, Serbian authorities began responding to some alerts published on the Council of Europe's Safety of Journalists Platform.

During the 2026 mission, the delegation met with a range of media stakeholders, including leading journalists and editors from print, online, broadcast, and investigative media, as well as media associations and unions, media experts, and civil society organisations. Representatives of Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) and Adria News Network (ANN) participated in separate meetings.

The delegation also held meetings with the Parliamentary Speaker, the Chief Prosecutor, representatives of the Ministry of Interiors and the police, as well as representatives of embassies and international organisations. President Aleksandar Vučić was not available for a meeting, while requests for meetings with the Prime Minister and the Minister of Justice went unanswered. On 27 March, the delegation held a press briefing at the site of the killing of journalist Slavko Ćuruvija in Belgrade. The delegation extends its thanks to all stakeholders who met with them during the mission.



Delegates of the media freedom mission to Belgrade at the press point held in front of the Slavko Ćuruvija memorial on 27 March 2026.



INTRODUCTION

CONTEXTUALISING THE DECLINE OF MEDIA FREEDOM IN SERBIA

Since the start of the [largest protests](#) in Serbian history, triggered by the deadly collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad railway station on 1 November 2024, the already deteriorating environment for media freedom and the safety of journalists in Serbia has worsened further. Ranked 104th out of 180 countries, and last among all EU and Western Balkan countries in the [2026 RSF World Press Freedom Index](#), media freedom in Serbia has reached a new historical low. The current crisis facing the media in Serbia – arguably one of the most severe in Europe – cannot be fully understood without properly contextualising the attacks and threats against journalists during the protests that followed the Novi Sad tragedy, as well as the authorities' failure to adequately safeguard media freedom.

The environment for the practice of journalism in Serbia has always been challenging. However, since the beginning of the student-led protests, the authorities have failed to adequately protect journalists and their work and have not responded to protesters' demands for rule of law, democracy, and a healthier media environment. This failure has deepened divisions, both within the media community and across society more broadly. The media landscape reflects this fracture.

A profound lack of trust in public authorities among journalists is evident. Distrust between pro-government and independent media outlets hinders solidarity across the media sector. A perceived misalignment in the application of ethical journalism standards in journalists' practice fuels such distrust and reinforces the spread of disinformation. This also interferes with both the documentation of attacks and the building of solidarity in response to incidents. Similar distrust towards the authorities is also widespread within civil society. Civil society and media organisations remain sceptical of government-led initiatives, suspecting that legal reforms serve primarily to introduce cosmetic improvements while simultaneously advancing provisions that further undermine media freedom and other fundamental rights.

In this context, there are few remaining avenues for meaningful improvement without strong political will translated into concrete measures that genuinely protect the work and safety of journalists in Serbia.

SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS

The safety of journalists in Serbia has deteriorated at an alarming rate since November 2024, making it the country with the [most documented incidents](#) on the MapMF platform for 2025. In 2025, there were 209 press freedom violations – more than double the 84 recorded in 2024 – affecting 359 media workers and entities, including young journalism students. These included:

44	48	130	40	12
physical assault cases	property attacks	verbal abuse cases	censorship cases	legal incidents

Since January 2026, the spiral of violence has continued to accelerate, affecting at least [168 media workers](#) and forcing many into a survival mode simply to perform their duties in the public interest. Many journalists faced an unprecedented level of violence while covering protests. As [documented](#) by the MFRR mission to Serbia in April 2025, during which the delegation criticised law enforcement for their failure to protect journalists, police have increasingly become perpetrators themselves. Unknown groups and individuals also perpetrated attacks against journalists.

Since 2025, MapMF has [documented](#) at least 38 police attacks on journalists, resulting in injuries to five journalists. Police have also confiscated equipment, including items belonging to the student news outlet Blokada INFO in Novi Sad, which have not yet been [returned](#), and have carried out multiple [arbitrary arrests](#), raising serious concerns about press freedom and journalists' safety.

During the protests, individuals at the so-called Čacilend tent settlement (a pro-government encampment in front of the National Assembly) targeted journalists in several [incidents](#), yet police repeatedly failed to respond adequately. One particularly concerning case occurred in November 2025, when an unidentified individual destroyed a camera belonging to an N1 crew member. Despite being alerted, police officers at the scene failed to intervene in support of the journalist.

From March to December 2025, the [Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia](#) (NUNS) [recorded](#) 77 instances in which the police failed to respond adequately to cases of assault against journalists or of obstruction of their work during demonstrations (this number includes cases in which the police were the perpetrators of the violence, or cases of arbitrary detentions of journalists and identity checks).

Interviewed journalists told the delegation that they could not seek protection from the police, and that during the protests they established mechanisms to protect each other. To enhance protection of journalists covering protests, some journalist associations provided helmets and vests to journalists to ensure their protection during the demonstrations. This formed the basis of a coordinated [smear campaign](#) against NUNS, which had made their offices available to journalists reporting on the protests in Belgrade. Pro-government media outlets and their supporters falsely alleged that NUNS's distribution of safety equipment to journalists demonstrated support for the use of violence during what were peaceful protests. The series of physical attacks on journalists and attempts to obstruct their work during the municipal elections in March 2026 confirmed the delegation's concerns: the violence is continuing, and authorities must take urgent action to prevent further escalation and restore journalists' trust in the police's ability to protect them.

During the meeting with Parliamentary Speaker Ana Brnabić, the delegation was alarmed that she appeared unaware of police attacks on journalists during the protests and of Supreme Public Prosecution Office [statistics](#) indicating a sharp spike in attacks on journalists. This reflected the wider disconnect between journalists' experiences on the ground and the authorities' assessment of the situation, which was evident throughout the media freedom mission to Belgrade. In a separate meeting with the police, the delegation presented concrete and well-documented examples of officers perpetrating attacks on journalists; however, the law enforcement representatives did not commit to implementing adequate protective measures for journalists.

In addition to physical attacks, numerous death threats and calls for violence have been directed towards journalists online, predominantly through social media. Since the beginning of 2026, authorities have documented at least 24 online threats against journalists, [including 20 death threats](#) and [10 cases of sexual harassment](#) involving journalists and their family members. The authorities have failed to take the necessary protective and investigative measures, with threats rarely prosecuted and safety measures seldom granted. The delegation further notes that, due to a widespread mistrust and insufficient response from authorities to reported threats, most journalists have stopped reporting such cases to the police.

SMEAR CAMPAIGNS

State officials in Serbia have directly fuelled hostility towards the media. State authorities, including President Vučić, have contributed to smearing journalists and media outlets with dangerous public statements, regardless of the risk to journalists' safety. Disseminated and amplified by pro-government media and tabloids, the falsehoods and discrediting comments denigrating independent voices have fuelled further hatred towards those regularly threatened with death and physical violence over their critical reporting.

For example, during a parliamentary debate in March 2026, Culture Minister Nikola Selaković [said](#) that 'something bad should happen' to journalist Dinko Gruhonjić, who has been frequently targeted by smear campaigns over his support for independent journalism and has faced multiple threats against him. On 21 April 2026, Milenko Jovanov, head of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) parliamentary group, and MP Marijan Rističević also [targeted](#) journalists from media outlets N1 and TV Nova with verbal harassment and dehumanising rhetoric. Another significant example was the smear campaign in which the newly formed pro-government Association of Journalists of Serbia (ANS) criticised NUNS for providing journalists with safety equipment that would help them work safely amid violent repression during protests. In October 2025, this smear campaign, [backed](#) by President Vučić, was amplified by the tabloid media. This led journalists to avoid wearing the equipment for fear they would be portrayed as ready for violence and exposed to further physical assaults. In December 2025, President Vučić [intimidated](#) N1 journalist Mladen



Serbian gendarmerie officers separate protesters from opposing camps during an anti-government protest in Belgrade, Serbia, Wednesday, 13 August 2025.

© Picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS | Darko Vojinovic

Savatović during a press conference, accusing the journalist of 'calling him Hitler', repeatedly labelling the President a 'liar', and using statements intended to humiliate and intimidate him. Following this, the journalist was the target of serious threats on social media.

Following multiple cases of verbal harassment against the media by authorities and government officials, as well as a sharp decline in the number of resolved cases in 2024 that continued into 2025, five of the six Serbian journalist associations that are members of the Standing Working Group on the Safety of Journalists have frozen their membership of the group. The exception is the Journalists' Association of Serbia. The associations cited the lack of potential for meaningful dialogue while government actors continue to actively engage in hostile behaviour against the press. State officials, beginning with President Vučić, must refrain from incitement to violence, discrimination, or hostility, as well as threats to life and personal safety. They should also avoid dehumanising and offensive rhetoric and condemn the use of any verbal connotation that contributes to the dehumanisation of journalists or puts their lives in danger.

The delegation draws a connection between the irresponsible rhetoric used by senior government officials towards independent journalists and the high level of abuse directed at journalists on social media and by government supporters in public spaces. During the meeting with Parliamentary Speaker Brnabić, the delegation discussed the media freedom environment in Serbia and called on the authorities to uphold the heightened responsibilities of public office, including refraining from discrediting, demonising, and targeting journalists, and condemning all attacks against them.

IMPUNITY AND LACK OF INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

The mission's delegation was concerned to learn that, despite multiple serious cases reported last year – the Supreme Public Prosecutor Office initiated 140 cases concerning journalists and media workers in 2025 – judicial authorities secured only three convictions for physical assault on journalists, none of which involved police officers. The delegation attributes this outcome to the continued breakdown of the rule of law and erosion of dedicated systems for protecting journalists in Serbia. It further notes that the inadequate response of the police to prosecutors' requests in cases involving attacks on journalists results in the systematic failure to gather sufficient evidence for public prosecutions.

In meetings with the Ministry of Interior and the police, the delegation also notes that the authorities describe the use of force by police officers during protests as 'adequate', given the large number of gatherings and demonstrations that law enforcement has had to manage every day since the start of the student-led protests. Furthermore, the delegation expresses concern that, despite direct requests and follow-ups, the police have not provided any data on internal disciplinary procedures against officers alleged to have used physical violence against journalists whilst covering protests. As a direct result, investigations are started but rarely yield results. Impunity for attacks on journalists has become the 'norm' to the detriment of their safety.

According to data received from the Supreme Public Prosecution Office, authorities initiated 25 cases involving 19 journalists or media workers in January and February 2026. In 2025, 140 cases were initiated, concerning 103 individuals working in journalism, compared with 65 cases affecting 50 individuals in 2024, indicating a sharp increase in criminal cases involving journalists since the start of the student-led protests.

The mission's findings further show that, despite a dramatic 367% increase in physical attacks referred to by the Supreme Public Prosecution Office following the November 2024 Novi Sad tragedy, judicial authorities secured only three convictions for such crimes in 2025.

During the meeting, Parliamentary Speaker Brnabić committed to improving the government's response rate to alerts published on the Council of Europe's Safety of Journalists Platform. Since the Platform's launch in 2015, the authorities in Serbia have failed to respond to 61% of total alerts. In 2025, the non-response rate reached a staggering 85%. Since the 2026 mission, the response rate to alerts has noticeably increased. While this is a positive step towards greater transparency and accountability, the mission partners stress that authorities must further improve the level of detail in their responses to the alerts. The partners will continue to closely monitor the state's responses to all Platform alerts.

The heinous 1999 assassination of Slavko Ćuruvija, which reached a final judicial **deadlock** in early 2026, most acutely represents the wider climate of impunity in Serbia. Although the Supreme Court of Serbia confirmed that the Court of Appeals misapplied the law, including misrepresenting key testimonies, which played in favour of the defendants, the acquittal of the four former state security officials remains final due to legal protections against double jeopardy. The family of Slavko Ćuruvija addressed the Constitutional Court, raising whether the provisions of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which allowed the acquittal of the four defendants, are in line with the Constitution of Serbia. The lack of accountability compounds the atmosphere of impunity in other landmark cases of murdered journalists, notably Milan Pantić in 2001 and Dada Vujasinović in 1994.

After the mission, the delegation noted on 15 May 2026 that the Second Basic Court in Belgrade **ruled** that the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation had defamed Milan Radonjić, Ratko Romić, and Miroslav Kurak. The three men had previously stood convicted of Ćuruvija's murder before a controversial ruling **overturned** the verdict in February 2024, leaving the murder case in a state of total impunity. International and European freedom of expression and media freedom organisations have raised concerns that the court ordered the Foundation to pay (RSD 1,035,000, equivalent to EUR 8,812), an amount disproportionately higher than damages awarded in similar defamation cases. The delegation also expressed concern that the scale of damages will deter others from investigating or publicly addressing Ćuruvija's murder and the family's fight against impunity.



Serbian journalists block the traffic outside the offices of Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic in Belgrade, Serbia, 1 April 2026, in protest of mounting attacks and pressure on the media.

© AP Photo | Darko Vojinovic

DIGITAL THREATS

Social media and distributed denial-of-service attacks

In early 2026, coordinated bot attacks emerged as a new censorship tactic in Serbia.

Attackers targeted the social media profiles of 30 journalists and media outlets, temporarily suspending some accounts and limiting the dissemination of independent news. The perpetrators used coordinated inauthentic behaviours within a short timeframe, including sudden surges in followers driven by fake profiles. The attackers also flooded accounts with false reports of alleged community guideline violations. This triggered automatic suspensions of accounts by Meta. Media outlets escalated the incidents to Meta through their communications channels and with the support of partner organisations in Serbia. Meta eventually restored the accounts.

These attempts to block the social media platforms of media organisations represent a worrying new form of digital censorship in Serbia, and form part of a broader trend of increased threats, smear campaigns, and legal pressure against journalists. Although Meta reinstated the blocked accounts, the mission warns that malicious actors could exploit these platform flaws unless additional safeguards are put in place. Additionally, in February 2026, [attackers subjected several media outlets](#) to distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, which caused their websites to load slowly before becoming completely inaccessible to readers.

SPYWARE

The use of spyware against journalists has been a major concern in Serbia. In December 2024, Amnesty International published a [report](#) documenting cases of illegal surveillance and illegal use of spyware in Serbia against journalists and NGO activists. The report highlighted Serbia's pervasive and routine use of invasive spyware, including NSO Group's Pegasus and a newly developed domestically produced tool known as NoviSpy. Following the publication, Cellebrite, a company that provides digital forensic extraction devices to Serbia, [temporarily suspended](#) its licence to the Serbian government. However, it [restored](#) the licence a few months later.

Police authorities rejected the findings of the Amnesty International report and denied all related allegations. In 2025, one of the individuals subjected to illegal surveillance filed criminal charges with the Prosecutor's Office for High Technological Crime. When the MFRR mission first made enquiries in April 2025, the case was still at the investigative phase.

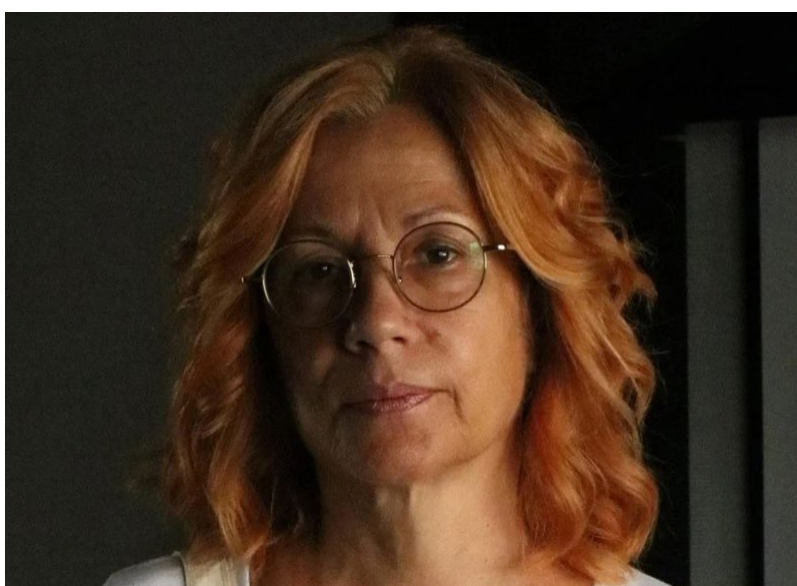
Since then, authorities have [documented](#) two further cases involving journalists from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN). However, the attempted spyware attack was ultimately unsuccessful as the targeted journalists identified the infected messages as suspicious. [Reports](#) indicate that the attackers used Pegasus, an advanced spyware tool developed and sold by the Israeli cybersurveillance company NSO Group.

Serbian law classifies the use of spyware to target journalists as a criminal offence under the country's Criminal Code. Serbian authorities have repeatedly denied involvement, while NSO Group insists it only sells such technology to state security and intelligence agencies.

During meetings with the police and Ministry of Interiors representatives, the police informed the delegation that investigations in all three cases had been concluded, that no violations were found, and that the cases had been returned to the Prosecutor. They restated that all procedures had been conducted in accordance with the law.

When asked by the delegation whether they suspected some form of surveillance by state authorities, a majority of journalists from independent media raised their hands. The delegation is also aware of additional, publicly unreported cases of spyware surveillance targeting journalists in Serbia.

The uncontrolled use of spyware against journalists, combined with the development of domestic surveillance technology such as NoviSpy, creates a worrying surveillance climate affecting media freedom in Serbia.



BIRN journalist Jelena Veljković was one of those to have had her phone targeted with an infected link which would have secretly installed Pegasus spyware.

MEDIA PLURALISM AND MEDIA INDEPENDENCE

Serbia's media landscape continues to be characterised by high levels of government influence over the media ecosystem, sustained pressures on independent media, and eroding levels of media pluralism driven by media acquisitions by the majority state-owned Telekom Srbija.

Pro-government channels dominate national television frequencies, while staunchly pro-government tabloid media control the print sector.

Radio Television Serbia continues to face criticism from media observers and civil society for the lack of balance and independence in its news and current affairs coverage. Major independent media outlets, alongside a small community of investigative media, continue to operate, but face sustained pressure in the form of lawsuits, spyware attacks, and politicised interference designed to disrupt their businesses. Recent developments surrounding the [potential sale of United Group's media assets](#), including N1 – the last major news broadcaster critical of the government – reflect broader market pressures and political meddling in independent media.

The media freedom mission concludes that political actors in Serbia exercises some of the highest levels of pressure on the media compared to other Western Balkan countries. Political interests continue to exert significant influence over private media, the public broadcaster, the dysfunctional system for media regulation, and the allocation of state advertising. Serbia has, by far, the highest level of media capture within the region and one of the highest anywhere in Europe. As a result, the media system in Serbia is structured and operates in a way that reinforces the pro-government media narrative. Serbia is also the only EU candidate country without a functioning media regulatory council. These systemic factors have further constrained independent journalism during the first half of 2026 and continue to undermine media pluralism more widely. Rather than advancing towards closer alignment with EU standards on media freedom, the current Serbian government appears intent on continuing its current policy of adopting EU-mandated legal amendments on paper, while simultaneously accelerating its media capture model in practice, most notably through ownership acquisitions by the majority state-owned Telekom Srbija. This poses a fundamental challenge for the EU.

The [2025 EU Rule of Law](#) and [EU Enlargement Policy](#) reports on Serbia have correctly identified clear backsliding on freedom of expression and media freedom, and have also highlighted the increasing threats to the safety of journalists as the principal factor. However, the authorities have also driven media freedom erosion through the consolidation of media ownership under Telekom Srbija, the ongoing suffocation of editorial independence at RTS, and the refusal of the ruling party to cede majority control of the REM Council.

The European Commission should assess the Serbian authorities' approach to media freedom in its entirety and ensure that partial legal alignment does not obscure its assessment of media freedom, media pluralism, or editorial independence in future reports.

REM COUNCIL AND MEDIA REGULATION

One of the most visible examples of the crisis in Serbia's media system is the continued non-functioning of the media regulatory authority, the REM Council. Since November 2024, authorities have left the national media regulator's nine-member Council without a functional quorum, rendering it unable to perform its mandate. During the mission, the delegation met with Parliamentary Speaker Brnabić to discuss the election of the REM Council, which forms part of the EU's assessment of Serbia's progress on media freedom under the accession process.

While [concerns about REM's work](#) predate the current impasse, the authorities have allowed the REM Council to remain non-functional for more than 18 months, creating a significant vacuum in audiovisual media regulation in Serbia. This regulatory gap has allowed harmful and discrediting media content to be disseminated. Of particular concern was the recent prime-time broadcast of a defamatory documentary series produced by the Centre for Social Stability as part of a smear campaign against Veran Matic, President of the Association of Independent Electronic Media and a member of the Standing Working Group on the Safety of Journalists. The broadcast, which also targeted actors defending independent journalism, significantly increased risks to Matic's safety. After the previous REM Council's mandate expired in late 2024, the authorities launched a first election attempt to elect a new Council in January 2025.

However, this initial process collapsed after independent candidates withdrew, citing multiple irregularities. Observers attributed the withdrawal of the independent candidates to the alleged manipulation of the process by the SNS-dominated Culture and Information Committee of the National Assembly, which oversees the initial selection process for the REM Council. During the meeting in Belgrade, Parliamentary Speaker Brnabić rejected this characterisation of the process.

After a delay of almost a year, the National Assembly held another voting process in December 2025 and **appointed** eight members to the REM Council. This was evenly split between four independent candidates and four aligned with the government. However, when the appointment of a ninth candidate representing national minority groups emerged as likely to tip the scale in favour of independent members, the ruling majority abstained from the vote, blocking the final decision.

This move triggered allegations of obstruction and led to the **resignation** of four of the elected members. Media freedom groups **warned** at the time that the abstention represented a clear effort to retain government influence over the regulatory body. Since then, the REM Council has remained non-operational, enabling the continued dissemination of unregulated, unethical, and abusive media content. Civil society actors also question the alleged expertise and independence of the four members currently serving on the Council.

In the meeting with Parliamentary Speaker Brnabić, she expressed frustration that independent media outlets, journalist associations, and civil society actors refused to participate in renewing the process. When the delegation challenged Brnabić during the meeting, saying that the SNS's abstention from the process after the government appeared set to lose its majority on the Council, she again turned the blame towards independent media actors. She also expressed frustration over the delayed election process and stated that she had personally engaged in international efforts, facilitated by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, to find a workable solution to the REM Council deadlock.

Following the mission, the delegation concludes that the ongoing dysfunction and the National Assembly's failure to appoint a full REM Council stem from the ruling party's apparent refusal to cede control over the key media regulator. While international organisations have urged independent journalists' and media associations to re-engage in the process, the mission organisations support their stance that elections can only proceed under acceptable conditions that ensure transparency, integrity, fairness, and independence are the guiding principles.

The newly adopted [European Media Freedom Act](#) sets clear standards: national media regulatory authorities must be legally, functionally, and financially independent, shielded from political interference and influence, and appointed through fair, transparent, and merit-based procedures. Moving forward, any EU assessment of progress on media freedom in Serbia must be conditioned on a complete, lawful, and transparent appointment of the REM Council. The apparent refusal of the governing majority to lose control over the REM stems from its central role that the regulator plays in the media ecosystem. Before its mandate expired in late 2024, the REM Council faced criticism over its selective approach and discriminatory regulatory decisions. Under the previous REM Council, the authorities [awarded](#) four of the available five major national television frequency channels to pro-government broadcasters, while excluding the one major independent broadcaster. The authorities have still not concluded the competition for the [allocation](#) of the fifth national frequency and have not provided a justified explanation for the delay.

As noted in the 2025 EU Enlargement Policy [report](#) on Serbia, the REM repeatedly delayed election monitoring reports, failed to take action against foreign information manipulation and interference, and awarded a broadcasting licence to Russia Today (RT). It also repeatedly failed to address major ethical breaches by tabloid media, allowing pro-government media outlets to continue smearing and attacking the ruling party's critics, including independent media and journalists. Through its role in appointing the Boards of Directors of Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) and Radio Television of Vojvodina (RTV), the REM Council also wields significant influence over the governance and oversight of public broadcasting in Serbia.

TELEKOM SRBIJA

One of the most significant factors undermining media pluralism in Serbia is the increasing role of Telekom Srbija in the media market. The Serbian state, which holds a majority stake in the telecommunications company, enabled this expansion in media ownership through amendments to media laws passed in October 2023. The legal reform to the [Law on Public Information and Media](#) and the [Law on Electronic Media](#), both amended in 2025 and adopted as part of EU-mandated amendments, made it legal for state-owned companies to own media outlets. In practice, this [legalised](#) an already existing situation in which Telekom Srbija held controlling stakes in multiple television stations and media outlets.

Since the laws were passed in 2023, Telekom Srbija has aggressively expanded its media ownership and investment portfolio. This expansion has intensified concerns about the consolidation of media by state-owned companies and the further erosion of media pluralism.

This new buying spree began in December 2025, when Telekom Srbija acquired an 80% stake in the pro-government publisher Mondo, which publishes the influential tabloid *Kurir*, among other media.



© Picture alliance / dpa | Koca Sulejmanovic

In early 2025, Telekom Srbija also **bought** a 100% stake in Net TV Plus, a television station targeting the diaspora community, and subsequently took over Total TV, which operates in Serbia and North Macedonia. While the acquisition of Mondo provided financial backing to a major tabloid publisher already known for strong pro-government coverage, the direct takeovers of Net TV Plus and Total TV raised concerns about increasing pressure on editorial independence and their repositioning with government narratives. In other cases, Telekom Srbija has provided investment in media outlets at key moments.

In 2018–2019, the company's management, which is closely aligned with President Vučić, acquired cable operator Kopernikus Technology at a price significantly above market value. The proceeds of the sale were subsequently used by the seller to purchase the national TV channels Prva and O2. In another major case in 2018, Telekom Srbija invested in Wireless Media, owned by a pro-government media individual, significantly strengthening its position in the market. The owners of these media outlets then aligned editorially with the ruling party and published government propaganda and disinformation, including messages that praised President Vučić and the ruling SNS and criticised their political opponents. Telekom Srbija also dropped N1 from satellite distribution, weakening the reach and audience of a broadcaster critical of the government.

In April 2026, after the mission, Telekom Srbija **raised EUR 2 billion in bonds, raising concerns about further expansion of this ongoing media acquisition campaign.** These investments and acquisitions by Telekom Srbija represent a form of state-orchestrated media consolidation, which has strengthened pro-government media and eroded media pluralism in Serbia since 2024. As such, the adoption of elements of the EU-guided Law on Public Information and Media, which allowed these state-funded acquisitions of media outlets, has had a detrimental and regressive impact on media freedom since the law entered into force in October 2023. The mission concludes that Telekom Srbija should be considered one of the Serbian government's principal mechanisms for calibrating media pluralism and maintaining favourable market conditions for the ruling SNS party.

RADIO TELEVISION OF SERBIA

During the mission, the delegation met with the management of RTS, Serbia's public broadcaster, at its headquarters in Belgrade. Media stakeholders have long criticised RTS for news coverage perceived as favouring the government and limiting opposition voices. At the same time, it has operated in a polarised environment, where both the authorities and the protesters criticise its coverage – accusing it simultaneously of favouring the government and of giving excessive airtime to the protests. Demonstrators have also called for an end to perceived political bias and for a more independent and informative public service broadcaster.

As part of the mission, the delegation heard from multiple media stakeholders who raised concerns about RTS's coverage of the demonstrations. Several interlocutors felt that the public broadcaster did not prominently or comprehensively cover the initial phases of the protests. Despite this, RTS remained the most-watched television broadcaster in the country during the peak of the protests.

At the same time, public perception of RTS's independence remains low. A citizens' assembly organised by NUNS on 24 May 2025 revealed significant dissatisfaction among participants with how RTS informs citizens, particularly in its news and current affairs programmes. Participants called for greater transparency, accountability, and professionalism to rebuild public trust and ensure the broadcaster serves the public interest.

Amendments to the [Law on Public Media Services](#) were adopted in June 2025, but these changes did not improve the institutional or functional independence of public broadcasters. Questions therefore remain about whether the RTS response to the protests fully reflected the editorial independence and public service mandate expected by citizens and stakeholders.

While covering the protests, RTS journalists have faced booing, threats, and criticism from the protesters on the ground. The delegation notes protesters repeatedly subjected RTS journalists to verbal abuse, attacks, and obstruction while they carried out their duties, notably at Autokomanda on 27 January 2025 and on several occasions in Novi Sad. Criticism of the RTS coverage of the protests escalated in March 2025, when protesters **blockaded** the headquarters of RTS in Belgrade and RTV in Novi Sad. After RTS rejected their request to participate in a live RTS broadcast, students first blocked the entrances to the RTS building twice for approximately 22 hours, and then again for two weeks from 14–29 April, preventing employees from entering the building.

Protesters called for RTS to operate as an independent public service broadcaster that reports objectively and complies with legal and professional standards. Protesters also announced that demonstrations would continue until authorities issued a new call for the appointment of REM Council members. Following these protests, the government agreed to **restart** the REM Council appointment process.



22-hour protest of students and citizens around the building of RTS in Belgrade, Serbia, 10 March 2025.

Criticism also came from within RTS, where employees and other stakeholders joined the Naš pRoTeSt movement to call for improvements in the RTS coverage. During its meeting with the delegation, RTS management confirmed internal criticism, stating that participants in the protests represented fewer than 10% of RTS employees and that some staff had participated in the March 2025 blockade alongside citizens expressing dissatisfaction with the RTS editorial line. Some interlocutors expressed concerns about the treatment of employees who had participated in or supported the protests. The incoming director has not yet met with the employees who joined the movement, but she confirmed a willingness to engage. The ongoing failure and delay to constitute the REM Council has disrupted the governance of RTS. The REM Council appoints all nine members of the RTS Steering Board. In December 2025, the RTS governance situation deteriorated further when the mandate of one RTS Steering Board member expired. Due to the failure to appoint a new REM Council, it has not yet been possible to appoint a replacement, leaving the position vacant.

Looking ahead, the situation raises additional concerns. The mandates of five members of the Steering Board, including the Chair, are due to expire on 13 July 2026. If the authorities do not appoint a new REM Council, RTS risks losing a functioning Steering Board by mid-2026, leaving a governance vacuum at the public broadcaster. The mandates of the remaining three members are set to expire in 2027 and 2029.

This underlines the urgent need for robust institutional safeguards that genuinely protect editorial independence and enable RTS to fulfil its public service mandate free from political pressure or influence. The situation also highlights how RTS governance depends on the proper constitution of an independent and fully functioning REM Council and raises concerns about institutional continuity and stability in the oversight of the public service broadcaster. At the same time, RTS has recently appointed new leadership, with a new Director-General now in place. This change creates expectations that RTS will establish and safeguard editorial independence, particularly in its news and current affairs.

N1 AND ADRIA NEWS NETWORK

Recent developments following the mission involving N1 Serbia and the newly established Adria News Network (ANN) have raised concerns about potential threats to editorial independence at the country's last major broadcaster critical of the government. Additional reporting about the potential sale of a portion of United Group's media assets, including N1 and TV Nova in Serbia, have sparked further questions about the impact of media ownership changes on remaining independent and critical journalism.

During the mission, the delegation met with the management of ANN, the umbrella organisation for United Group media assets across the Western Balkans, including Serbia. ANN, owned by United Group, replaces United Media, and launched in early 2026. In Serbia, this group includes major independent outlets such as N1, TV Nova, Danas, Nova.rs, and Radar.

During the meeting with ANN's Chief News Officer Brent Sadler, ANN's management team presented it as a new governance model designed to establish strong firewalls between ownership and newsrooms and to protect editorial independence from external pressures. The team explained that ANN and its board came about following the conclusion of a wider legal battle over the corporate structure and control of United Group.

Shortly after the mission, N1 News Director Igor Božić was **removed** from day-to-day editorial leadership and put on special leave. The delegation met separately with Božić while in Belgrade as part of a pre-arranged meeting with editors and journalists. Božić had previously defended editorial independence at N1.

Journalists, media associations, and trade unions **protested** ANN's decision to remove Božić and called for guarantees that editorial policy would not be affected by the leadership change. After the mission, the delegation requested clarification from ANN regarding the reasoning behind this management decision.

During the mission, the delegation also raised concerns about a [leaked audio recording](#) published in August 2025 by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and the Serbia investigative media outlet KRIK, which captured a conversation between Stan Miller, CEO of United Group (which owns United Media/ANN), and Vladimir Lučić, CEO of Telekom Srbija and a close ally of President Vučić.

In the recording, the executives discussed the management of United Media, the potential weakening of its operations in Serbia, and the possible removal of its then-director, Aleksandra Subotić. The conversation also referenced [pressure on N1 and TV Nova](#) from the President Vučić, as well as a reference to Božić. The conversation came against a backdrop of reports alleging government efforts to neutralise United Media's critical news reporting during nationwide anti-government protests.

Following its publication, United Media stated that the leaked conversation concerned a private exchange and that elements had been taken out of context. However, Serbian media associations and journalists expressed alarm about a perceived attempt by high-level Serbian politicians to influence newsroom policy through intermediaries and weaken the editorial independence of the country's only major critical news broadcaster. The issue also drew reactions from the European Commission. In response to these concerns and in an effort to safeguard editorial independence, editors and directors of United Group's media outlets proposed a management buyout from the ultimate owners, BC Partners, in November 2025. The owners rejected the proposal.

In February 2026, Aleksandra Subotić was removed as the director of United Media. This management change coincided with the launch of ANN, which formed part of a wider reorganisation of United Group's media assets. During the mission meeting, Sadler denied that Subotić's removal was connected to matters discussed in the leaked phone call, stating that it was part of a wider management reshuffle linked to the formation of ANN. The delegation met with multiple stakeholders in Belgrade who challenged this narrative,

and instead linked Subotić's removal to wider political pressure and corporate interests. In the meeting, Sadler stressed that the creation of ANN was to protect its media outlets from exactly this kind of pressure.

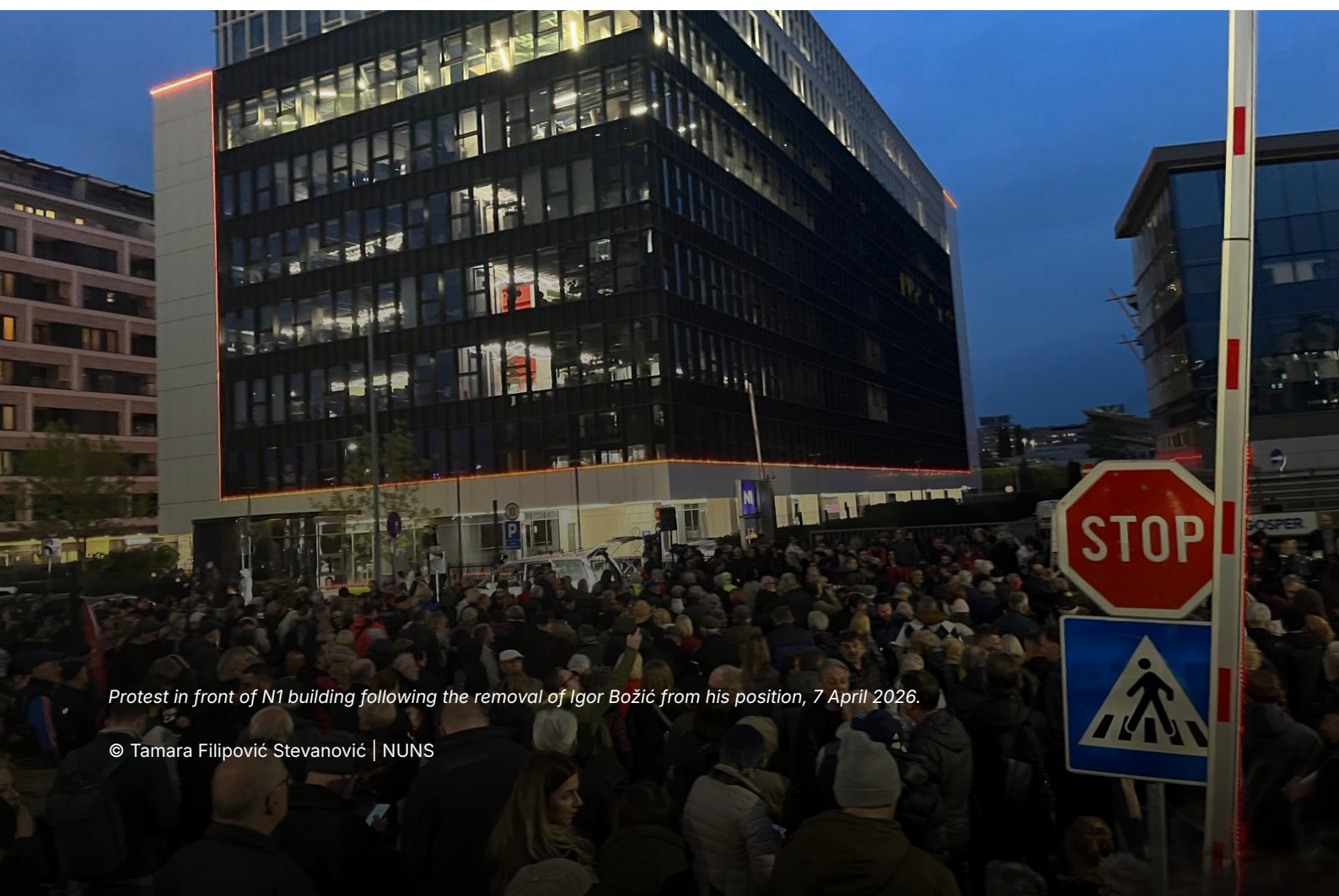
Following the mission, Božić left the network in April 2026. His departure renewed concerns among domestic media groups, which warned that it could threaten N1's independence. Since the second management change, local journalist associations have increasingly scrutinised ANN's operations, warning that corporate manoeuvring is some form of wider agreement between the Serbian government and United Group (and its controlling investment firm, BC Partners), aimed at muzzling critical media reporting. Both the Serbian government and BC Partners have denied these allegations. Some mission partners had requested virtual meetings with BC Partners months before the visit to Belgrade, but they received no response.

In May 2026, two months after the mission, OCCRP and Raskrikavanje (a KRIK project that unveils disinformation in the media) renewed concerns over ownership of the country's major independent broadcasters when they [published](#) information about a leaked contract proposing the sale of many of United Media's assets across the Western Balkans, including in Serbia, to European Future Media Investments, a Luxembourg-based fund. Although the draft contract was not signed, it revealed the planned sale of TV broadcasters N1 and TV Nova, which operate in Serbia and other Western Balkan countries.

According to [reports](#), the contract links the buyer to Alpac Capital, a Portuguese investment firm that acquired pan-European broadcasting network Euronews in 2022. The contract reportedly [identifies](#) Pedro Vargas David, Alpac Capital's director, as a primary representative of the buyer. Earlier investigative reporting [revealed](#) that Hungarian state capital and companies closely allied with former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán heavily financed Alpac Capital's acquisition of Euronews. The proposed sale of United Media's assets to European Future Media Investments is valued at EUR 30 million.

According to OCCRP, the contract contains numerous clauses that explicitly guarantee editorial independence. It commits the buyer to respecting European standards on media pluralism, shielding newsrooms from commercial and political influence, and establishing an independent advisory body of international media professionals. However, the potential sale has once again raised concerns about how management changes could impact editorial independence at N1 and TV Nova, which many regard as crucial pillars of media pluralism in Serbia.

Currently, neither ANN nor United Group have responded to the reporting, and it remains unclear whether the deal will go ahead. Following these latest developments, the mission organisations will continue to closely monitor the situation and respond to any signs of threats to the editorial independence of United Group media assets or to broader political pressures.



Protest in front of N1 building following the removal of Igor Božić from his position, 7 April 2026.

LEGAL THREATS AGAINST JOURNALISTS

Abusive legal threats against the media, known as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), remain one of the most significant factors stifling journalism in Serbia. For the second consecutive year, the [2025 Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe](#) report ranked Serbia as the European country with the third-highest number of SLAPPs.

Since 2020, the Serbian national working group on SLAPPs has documented [73 cases](#), including 48 that targeted journalists, editors, publishers, and media outlets.

These figures understate the problem: many legal threats never progress to formal lawsuits, but pre-litigation processes, such as responding to correspondence and preparing for disclosure, still create the same chilling effect. Public officials and judges are among the most frequent claimants in SLAPP cases, underscoring the broader failure of state authorities to recognise and address these threats to media freedom.

Serbia decriminalised defamation in 2013; however, the offence of insult is still criminalised under Serbia's Criminal Code. Criminal insult infringes upon the right to freedom of opinion and stifles the work of journalists. It should therefore be decriminalised.

Claimants commonly use civil defamation as part of SLAPPs; however, the journalists and campaigners whom the delegation met reported that claimants also deploy a wide range of other legal causes of action to target independent journalism. In addition, over the last year, the use of criminal provisions to initiate abusive proceedings has increased.

For instance, Judge Dušanka Đordjević and her husband have [sued journalists](#) from the investigative portal KRIK under Article 146 of the Criminal Code for alleged unauthorised collection of personal data. The claim relates to KRIK's publication of information already in the public domain, including property records. The journalists now face the threat of a ten-month prison sentence and a two-year ban on practicing journalism. This case is just one of the 13 SLAPP lawsuits currently brought against KRIK.

Criminal proceedings pose an additional burden on defendants compared to civil cases because defendants must attend every hearing, significantly increasing the time diverted from their professional work.

Self-censorship is often a direct consequence of SLAPPs. Journalists told the delegates that producing stories now takes longer because they must conduct legal reviews prior to publication to avoid lawsuits. This is particularly challenging for daily news reporting, which typically depends on rapid turnaround times. Fear of litigation has also led some journalists to change their writing style by presenting investigative pieces as news stories, avoiding certain expressions, and adding disclaimers to their articles. These practices directly restrict both journalistic freedom and freedom of expression. Local stakeholders, including lawyers, NGOs, campaigners, and the national working group, have monitored specific cases; however, their analyses likely underestimate the true scale of the problem because SLAPP targets may be unwilling to discuss their cases publicly for fear of increasing their legal exposure.

The mission identified two groups of journalists particularly vulnerable to SLAPPs. The first group comprises journalists who work for local outlets outside major cities. They often lack connections to international solidarity networks, may have limited awareness of what constitutes a SLAPP, and have limited financial resources to adequately fund a legal defence. In addition, when journalists report from small villages or communities, their close proximity to the claimant significantly increases the risk of retaliation. As a result, journalists may avoid reporting on specific topics or parties and refuse to speak publicly about the legal threats they have faced.

The second group are young journalists who may not have the capacity, knowledge, or support structures in place to resist SLAPPs. The delegation heard that, in some instances, early-career journalists face lawsuits after publishing their first story. As a result, some journalists leave the industry, while others experience undue strain on their family relationships as they navigate the complexity of defending their journalism in court. Despite these challenges, journalists and civil society actors have developed strong solidarity networks, demonstrating resilience in the face of

mounting pressure. The Krokodil Association has established a 'SLAPP back' fund that provides legal representation and covers legal costs, fines, and court fees. According to the [Krokodil Association](#): 'between 2024 and 2026, this fund has contributed funding for financial obligations arising from completed proceedings (such as court costs, awarded compensations, fines) in approximately 11 criminal and civil cases'.

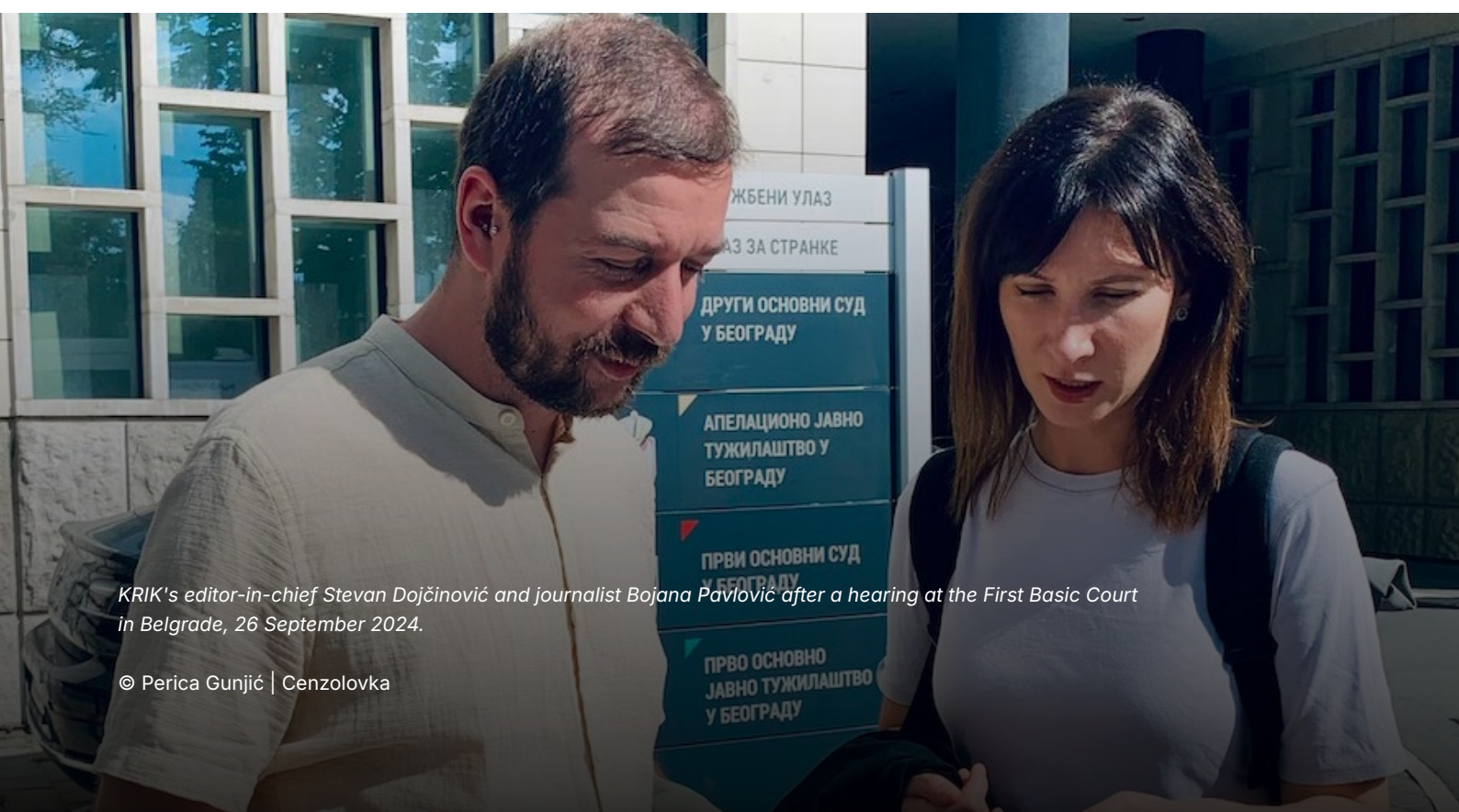
A coalition formed by KRIK, BIRN, and the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation regularly attends court hearings and reports on them to raise public awareness. The coalition also supports local journalists targeted by SLAPPs by investigating and publishing information related to the issue that brought about the abusive legal action in the first instance. This not only undermines the intended silencing effect of SLAPPs but also sends a powerful message to those who use SLAPPs: **attempts to silence reporting will ultimately amplify it by reaching more people.**

As a candidate country for EU membership, Serbia is required to align its laws and procedures to advance its accession process. In the context of SLAPPs, this requires implementation of the [European Commission's Anti-SLAPP Package](#), including the [EU Anti-SLAPP Directive](#). However, many stakeholders whom the delegation met expressed significant alarm and caution about this accession process. They feared that the government could use this EU legislative process to align Serbia's laws and introduce provisions that could further undermine civic space and strengthen government control.

The stakeholders suggested that Serbia should instead explore whether [existing legal provisions](#), such as those addressing the misuse of rights, could target SLAPPs. They considered this a more favourable option than risking new legislation. This exemplified a fundamental lack of trust between civil society and the government, which was evident in a number of meetings carried out throughout the mission. As a result, many civil society actors have become reluctant to engage in working groups led by government or the National Assembly.

Nevertheless, progress is needed. Stakeholders spoke of the conservative approach taken by the judiciary when it relates to SLAPPs without legislative protections. The fact that judges themselves initiate SLAPPs reinforces these concerns and raises questions about fair access to justice as the journalists targeted by the judges cannot be sure of impartiality between the judge acting as the claimant and the judge hearing the case.

Instruments such as the [Council of Europe's Recommendation on countering SLAPPs](#) provide member states, including Serbia, with a comprehensive roadmap for tackling abusive litigation and safeguarding journalism, whether through existing provisions or new legislation. During a meeting with Parliamentary Speaker Brnabić, she expressed a willingness to advance efforts to address SLAPPs. Her office subsequently sent a follow-up to cooperate on initiatives to amend national legislation to align it with the [EU Anti-SLAPP Directive](#). However, the delegation noted with concern that the government had not consulted national civil society actors or the media sector prior to making this proposal. Based on meetings with different stakeholders, the delegation concluded that civil society is unlikely to be willing to engage on a legislation reform at this stage, given the breakdown in trust between the relevant parties.



KRIK's editor-in-chief Stevan Dojčinović and journalist Bojana Pavlović after a hearing at the First Basic Court in Belgrade, 26 September 2024.

CONCLUSION

The media freedom mission observed that journalists and civil society have a significant lack of trust in the work and role of the current government and public authorities. A pronounced scepticism about whether the government has any genuine political will to address Serbia's ongoing crisis in media freedom emerged as a recurring theme in discussions with representatives of the media sector.

Despite this climate, the government has launched several initiatives intended to advance legislation affecting journalists and has invited civil society and media representatives to participate. In May 2025, the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications presented a set of [amendments](#) to the Law on Public Information and Media, the Law on Electronic Media (both amended in 2023), and the Law on Public Service Broadcasting. The Law on Public Information and Media's proposed wording may allow for broad interpretation and application of certain provisions (primarily on presumption of innocence) to the detriment of journalists.

The Media Freedom Coalition of Serbia requested consultations on these amendments, but the Ministry denied these, invoking time pressure from the EU to adopt such amendments. On 20 March 2026, the government established two working groups: one to amend the Law on Public Information and Media and the Law on Electronic Media, primarily to align them with the [European Media Freedom Act](#), and the other to draft a new Media Strategy. However, the decisions establishing these working groups do not define clear timelines or working methodologies, nor do they provide for compensation for participants. The government expects both groups to include 10 representatives from public institutions, 10 from the non-governmental sector, and 3 independent experts.

Moreover, on 10 September 2025, the Ministry of Justice opened a public consultation for amendments to the Criminal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Law on Juvenile Offenders.

The Ministry allowed only 20 days for consultation and did not provide any prior notice. Media associations in Serbia [pointed out](#) that the provisions to be amended may expand the scope of criminal repression and raise concerns regarding the right to peaceful assembly. Civil society actors and the media community fear that the government has accelerated these processes to comply with the obligations of the [European Commission's Reform Agenda](#), without ensuring an appropriate process that would guarantee transparency and inclusion of voices in decision-making. They have expressed strong reservations about engaging in government-led initiatives, citing limited inclusiveness, lack of transparency, and insufficient representative participation. These concerns are particularly pronounced in relation to legislative reform processes, where there is a fear that proposed amendments could ultimately undermine media freedom standards and weaken protections for journalists.

Civil society actors have also reported that the authorities intend to complete these initiatives within a short timeframe. During the mission, several civil society stakeholders expressed frustration with the EU. They feared the EU was encouraging Serbia to move rapidly through the accession process, without scrutinising the steps taken by the government and parliament. As outlined earlier, there are concerns that the Serbian government could use aligning legislation with EU law to introduce changes that further restrict media freedom and civic space, and that the EU has not been robust enough to respond to these concerns. Nevertheless, the EU delegation in Belgrade clarified that it imposed no such pressure on the government. On the contrary, it has emphasised that the quality of the process should take precedence over speed.

In the context of the current media freedom crisis in Serbia, calls for stronger engagement from the EU and other international partners have intensified. Many regard the EU as the key external actor best placed to exert meaningful pressure on the Serbian government to strengthen protection of journalists. Although concerns over the decline of media freedom and the safety of journalists have been raised with Serbian authorities through the EU accession process framework, these discussions have largely taken place behind closed doors and have yielded limited tangible results.

It must be emphasised that in October 2025, the European Parliament adopted a [strong resolution](#) on the protests in Serbia, which also condemned attacks on the media. One month later, the [2025 EU Enlargement Policy](#) report signalled a notable shift in the EU's approach towards Serbia. The report concluded that the Serbian government had failed to convincingly demonstrate its commitment to democratic principles and the rule of law. As a result, the EU intensified its scrutiny of the situation, which continues to deteriorate. It also announced the [possible suspension of EUR 1.5 billion in allocated funds](#) if the government does not comply with the Venice Commission's [recommendations](#) concerning the so-called '[Mrdić laws](#)', a controversial judicial reform package associated with reduced judicial independence. Although the EU has not yet decided on the suspension of funds, it has currently delayed the disbursement of instalments from the Growth Plan because Serbia has not fulfilled its benchmarks. In reality, Serbia continues to have one of the least free media environments anywhere in Europe, and this situation is continuing to worsen at the systemic level. The EU should therefore take strong action by linking media freedom backsliding to the release of EU funds within the accession process.

The international community plays a highly significant role in media freedom in Serbia. Some countries, like [Sweden](#), have suspended certain programmes and funding directed at Serbian institutions due to concerns over the government's commitment to media freedom and the rule of law. At the same time, many international actors have been actively involved in processes such as the appointment of members to the REM Council – albeit without achieving positive outcomes.

These developments have reduced confidence of the international community in the prospects for constructive engagement with the Serbian government on media freedom issues. In this context, and given the diminishing expectations at the national level, individual EU member states must address the conduct of the Serbian authorities and encourage a more assertive response from the EU. The Serbian authorities must demonstrate clear political will to break the downward spiral and ensure all attacks on the media are properly sanctioned under the law. Until then – and until they reduce political pressures on independent journalism – media freedom in Serbia will continue to suffer.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE GOVERNMENT

- State officials must cease all calls for violence against media workers and investigate these instances of incitement thoroughly.
- State officials must refrain from dangerous rhetoric, verbal pressure, and the public denigration of journalists and media outlets. It is the duty of the state authorities to create an enabling environment for media freedom and media pluralism. When calling on the media to report ethically, state officials must be careful not to discredit media workers in public discourse.
- State officials must condemn any intimidation of journalists.
- The Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice should implement specialised training programmes for police officers and judiciary officials to improve their application of protective measures focused on digital and physical safety. Sufficient funds should be allocated for this purpose.

Public officials must stop harassing journalists through the use of SLAPP lawsuits.

- State officials must ensure the proper functioning of the rule of law and refrain from any form of political pressure.
- Ministries must ensure that adequate time is granted for consultations on ongoing legislative amendments and that these processes are transparent and inclusive.

TO THE PARLIAMENT

- Members of parliament should refrain from verbally harassing and insulting journalists.
- Members of parliament must publicly condemn all attacks on journalists.
- The Committee for Culture and Information of the National Assembly of Serbia must restore integrity in the process of appointment of REM Council members and select individuals with credibility and integrity who have a demonstrated track record of commitment to the public interest. Ultimately, the appointment process must be transparent and in accordance with the law.
- Members of parliament must decriminalise the offence of insult once the necessary social and political conditions for legislative reform are in place.

TO THE POLICE

- Police must ensure that journalists are protected from violence or any other form of obstruction when reporting from the field.
- Police must comply with the agreements signed between the Ministry of Interior and the Prosecutor's Office on 1 April 2016 and between the Ministry of Interior, Prosecutor's Office, and media organisations on 26 December 2016.
- Law enforcement must cease all illegal police actions against the media and journalists, including physical assaults, arbitrary confiscation of equipment, and arrests.
- Police must thoroughly investigate any incident by which police officers attacked journalists during protests or failed to protect them when attacked. These proceedings should be conducted efficiently and in accordance with the law.
- Police should provide prompt assistance to prosecutors in the conduct of investigations, as the police are mandated to act on the prosecutor's orders in individual proceedings.
- Police should make publicly available data about internal disciplinary measures against police officers responsible for attacks against journalists.
- Police should strengthen the internal focal points system to ensure its effectiveness in practice, beyond a formal structure.

TO THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT

- The Constitutional Court should rule on the two cases brought by the Ćuruvija's family without undue delay, taking into account the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights.

TO THE PROSECUTION

- Prosecutors must promptly and thoroughly investigate all cases concerning journalists.
- Prosecutors must act in accordance with binding instructions, respond urgently, and comply with the agreements signed between the Ministry of Interior and the Prosecutor's Office on 1 April 2016 and between the Ministry of Interior, Prosecutor's Office, and media organisations on 26 December 2016.
- Prosecutors must investigate cyber harassment and take steps to hold tech platforms accountable. Online threats and smear campaigns against journalists, including spoofing and digital threats, must be thoroughly investigated.
- Prosecutors should thoroughly investigate cases of alleged use of spyware against journalists.
- Prosecutors must use all legal means to ensure that the police provide all necessary assistance to the prosecutors in the conduct of investigations.
- The competent institutions must ensure justice for the historic murders of journalists. This should include a thorough investigation into the killings of Dada Vujasinović and Milan Pantić.

TO RADIO TELEVISION OF SERBIA

- Radio Television of Serbia should consolidate and uphold editorial independence in such a way that ensures pluralism, with an emphasis on the areas of news and current affairs.

TO SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

- Social media platforms must ensure that any alert raised in relation to journalists' and media outlets' social media accounts is thoroughly vetted prior to applying any content moderation measures. Such content moderation measures should remain proportionate and not overbroad, subject to effective appeal mechanism and human review. Extreme content moderation measures such as restricting or blocking accounts should be reserved only for the most egregious and repeated violations of terms of service.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- The international community should advocate for the proper consolidation of the rule of law and protection of human rights in Serbia.
- The international community should strongly and openly condemn the conduct of the government regarding media freedom and protection of journalists, including by condemning any direct or indirect attack and smear campaign against journalists.
- The international community should consider conditioning direct funding to Serbia in certain strategic areas on tangible improvements in journalists' safety and freedom of the media.
- The EU must ensure that any assessment of progress on media freedom in Serbia must be conditioned on the fulfilment of the rule of law, the protection of journalists, and an independent and plural media environment.
- The international community should scrutinise the appointment of the REM Council members to ensure an independent, lawful, and transparent appointment process and the identification of candidates with the required criteria as prescribed by the law.
- The EU should closely scrutinise the process of enforcement of the existing laws protecting media freedom and freedom of expression.
- The EU should closely scrutinise any legislative amendment that intends to transpose or implement EU law in the national framework (European Media Freedom Act, Anti-SLAPP Directive, Digital Services Act) to ensure that they do not include legal provisions that may circumvent the purpose of such instruments or that introduces provisions aimed at undermining media freedom.
- The international community should provide support to civil society and independent media in Serbia.



MEDIA FREEDOM RAPID RESPONSE

safety of
journalists
platform

