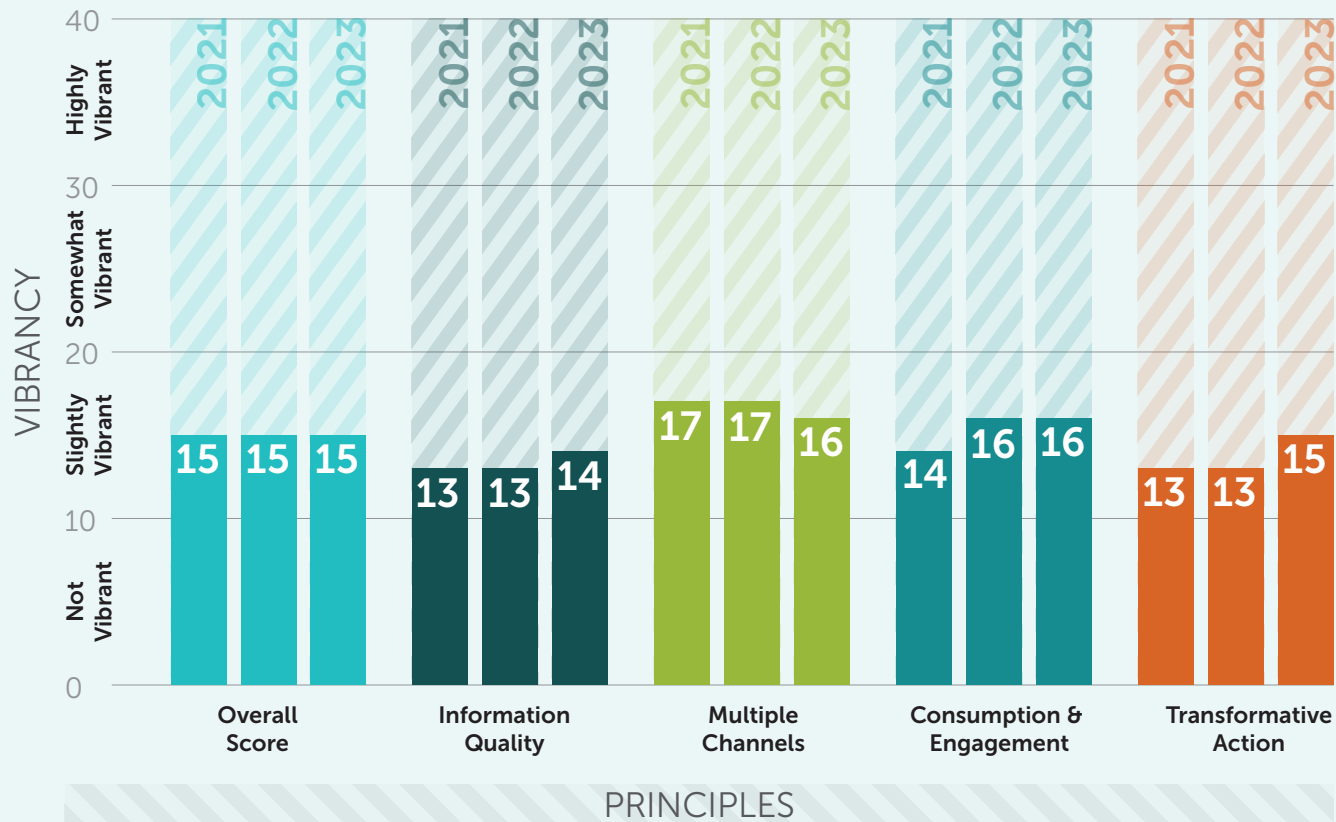


SERBIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 3





Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

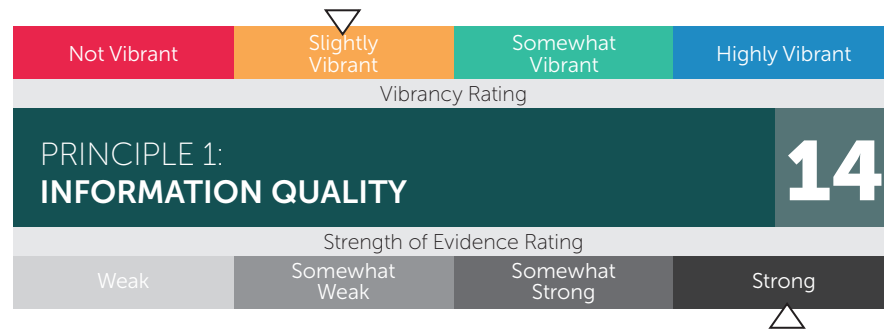
Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE**15**

Serbian democracy and rule of law deteriorated further in 2022. Legislators did not advance any laws to protect fundamental rights, freedom of expression, or freedom of the media. Moreover, Serbia faced many political and economic issues during the year: The inflation rate soared to 15.1 percent in December 2022, the largest increase in the last 15 years, and food and non-alcoholic beverage prices rose 22.5 percent, according to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. Serbia's external debt was at \$39.1 billion in September 2022, according to Serbia's Circular Economy Innovation Communities (CEIC) program.

Despite these worrying trends, political leaders invested enormous effort to persuade people that the nation's political and economic situation is the best in the history of Serbia. This propaganda campaign led to political rulers and their followers monumentally conflicting with professional media and independent investigative civil society organizations (CSOs). The Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation's four-month study in 2022 reported 84 cases of politicians verbally attacking journalists and investigative non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that were critical of national policies. More than 80 percent of those attacks came from President Aleksandar Vučić, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, and President of the Committee for Justice Jasmina Vasović from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Compared to the prior year, in 2022 Serbia's journalist associations recorded twice as many cases of pressure, attacks, threats, and other forms of media repression.

The 2022 VIBE overall score is 15, for a third year in a row. Though most panelists held the belief that freedoms deteriorated in 2022, several positive trends kept the low score from further decline. The year saw several improvements among the small number of independent and investigative media in Serbia's capital, Belgrade, and in other regions. These outlets bravely detected misinformation biases and acted professionally in the public interest. Journalist associations actively defended journalists and media under attack, especially in local areas. Women journalists continued to be on the front lines of the profession, and resisted government constraints. These media conducted serious research on media trends, and the journalism sphere widely spread fact-based data to counteract fake news content in government-controlled tabloids and television programs.



Serbia has more than 2,600 registered media and social networks, which produce volumes of information on a range of topics. However, the media sector has a dearth of quality content based on professional and ethical standards. Media controlled by authorities dominate in Serbia. As a result, many outlets avoid covering important themes and instead produce ethically questionable content and often report based on misinformation. As in previous years, this principle has the lowest score of the Serbia study. Two indicators in this principle—on sufficient resources for content production and on information is not intended to harm—received the lowest scores. The indicator on inclusivity and diversity received the highest scores, driven in part by the content that is available in national minority languages and the availability of news content in minority languages.

Indicator 1: There is quality information on a variety of topics available.

Serbia has an infrastructure that enables various content production. But availability is limited to professional local and regional media that operate under ethical and legal norms. Some digital media have adequate infrastructure, such as equipment, financial resources, and knowledgeable staff. These outlets produce quality short video formats, infographics, and maps. However, most media do not employ front-end developer professionals who could produce custom solutions for a specific newsroom or topic. Most local digital media frequently train their staff but have no capacity to produce quality content, given the

few employees in their newsrooms and their less-engaged younger journalists. Large, corporate media houses have incomparably better equipment, said Tamara Skrozza, a journalist and member of the Press Council’s Complaint Commission, Serbian media’s independent self-regulatory body. “Compared to us small media, they are spaceships.”

New and experienced journalists have training opportunities through state and private colleges as well as by NGOs. During 2022, journalists have access to a large number of training courses thanks to help from foreign donors. However, panelists agreed that no sponsors at any level offer training specifically for editors.

The Serbian fact-checking project *Raskrinkavanje* (Disclosure), produced by the nonprofit Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK), analyzed more than 4,000 texts that five national print dailies published from February through July 2022 regarding the Ukraine War. Those media transmitted short agency news or published texts in which journalists were neutral. But about 40 percent were biased, mostly supporting Russia and Putin, with daily outlet *Večernje Novosti* using heavy-handed misinformation. According to the International and Security Affairs Center (ISAC Fund) NGO, the most popular media sites in Serbia show pro-Russian narratives’ penetration into public opinion.

Tabloid editors and journalists do not respect professional and ethical standards, nor do staff at five of the national state-controlled television outlets (public service RTS 1, private Prva srpska televizija, private TV B92, private TV Pink, and private Happy TV). Tabloid media ignore the weak censures by the Press Council and its appeals commission. However, the most unregulated space is on social networks, where hate speech and the spread of misinformation go unpunished.

Most media work under direct or indirect government authority and therefore produce content with controlled topics. Panelists agreed that manipulative content prevails, and important stories and serious analysis of social, political, and economic issues are rare. Only a portion of Serbia’s consumers—those with access to media that honor professional standards and ethics—offer better insight into various topics.

Stojan Marković, editor-in-chief of *Čačanske novine* independent print and online portal Ozon Press, said that national online news outlets, including the public broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), do not offer quality information and are influenced by political parties. “Program content of private TV stations with a national coverage cannot be characterized as ethical,” he commented. Journalist stories in numerous so-called “regime media” do not represent honest reporting on government actions or actors, and are mostly obvious examples of “flatter journalism,” he added.

Transparency International data show that President Vučić, public officials, and candidates from Serbia’s ruling party were on the front pages of print newspapers 468 times in the pre-election period, with 86 percent in a positive tone.

“Regardless of the large number of media in Serbia, the quality of information is at an extremely low level,” noted *Raskrinkavanje* manager Vesna Radojević, “The small number of truly professional media that respect the Code of Journalists of Serbia are a counterweight to pro-regime media that do not respect standards and publish fake news daily.”

In public state-run media services, sensitive socio-political topics are reported only to the extent that they keep a safe distance from criticizing the ruling power. “Independent editors are the exception rather than the rule,” explained Siniša Isakov, professor at the University of Novi Sad.

Indicator 2: The norm for information is that content is based on facts.

Panelists noted that a small number of Serbia’s independent media adhere to presenting fact-based reporting, but the majority do not. Marković said that national TV reports from public service broadcasters RTS in Belgrade and Radio Televizija Vojvodine (RTV) in Novi Sad are normally unreliable and unobjective. Stories lack credible sources and abound with misleading information from state officials, according to Marković. Authorities use spin and manipulation almost every day, and the tabloid media follow suit.

Media do not face enough effective sanctions to prevent unprofessional journalistic work. Milivoje Mihajlović, RTS assistant general manager, pointed out that “disinformation dominates in the majority of pro-government media. Where there is no disinformation, there is concealment of information.”

Panelists noted an egregious case of unethical journalism in 2022. The tabloid *Informer* sparked public outrage with its interview of a recently released serial rapist, who talked about how women should behave when he rapes them. The Culture and Information Committee of the Serbian Parliament refused to discuss the reporting publicly; government-controlled media rationalized the interview and gave the *Informer* editors time on national TV to defend its actions.

In spite of the current government’s ambition to control the entire media space, the internet remains beyond its reach. The panelists acknowledged that social media platforms have generally improved access to information, but they said that the negative consequences of their misuse continue to grow. Online forums do not offer spaces where political debate and freedom of the press can thrive. Instead, they serve as weapons for advancing pro-government narratives and attacking critical voices, and ruling parties use them as tools to consolidate political power.

The Novi Sad School of Journalism and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) conducted investigations that showed the main targets of fake news on social media are journalists and the few credible media outlets in Serbia. These attacks are particularly apparent during elections.

Misinformation and fake news are a ubiquitous part of Serbian politics. Journalists hold the government responsible, but few criticisms of the ruling elite reach the public. Panelists pointed out that evidence of disinformation is easier to find on social networks. Several pro-journalism NGOs, such as the Fake News Tracker by *Raskrinkavanje* as well as journalist associations, are detecting fake news and disinformation. In 2022, *Raskrinkavanje* became a member of Poynter’s International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN).

In June 2022, the NGO ISAC Fund published an article analyzing comments on popular Serbian news portals. The article reported that many Balkan media have removed their website comment areas, but influential media outlets in Serbia maintain them. “They are widely used by regular readers and by political party troll networks,” the article stated, “These comments on news portals have additional significance, as they can oppose editorial policy of certain media.”

Indicator 3: The norm for information is that content is not intended to harm.

Russian state-funded news website and radio station Sputnik still strongly influence public opinion in the Serbian media landscape. In November 2022, RT Balkan (Russia Today-Balkan) was launched. According to a regional analysis, Serbia has the largest number of media in the Balkan region spreading disinformation about the war in Ukraine.¹ Panelists said TV Happy has a daily debate program on Russian aggression in Ukraine, which only discusses a pro-Russia point of view. *Raskrinkavanje* analyzed several pro-Russian tabloids and dailies in Serbia, including *Informer* and *Večernje Novosti*, which show the outlets openly spread Russian propaganda.

The Association of Journalists of Serbia (UNS) recorded a total of 140 cases of pressure, attacks, threats, and other forms of repression against the media in 2022, representing almost twice as many as in 2021. The UNS database shows that the ruling party conducted the majority of recorded threats. Opposition leaders also hurled insults at journalists. The year began with Pink television’s broadcast of a fake quasi-documentary film *Meta Porodica*. The 20-minute video labeled certain independent journalists as foreign mercenaries who were collaborating with intelligence services and criminal groups to attack and overthrow President Vučić and his family.

“Most media work under direct or indirect government authority and therefore produce content with controlled topics.”

According to Isakov, “In 2022, the number and frequency of published malicious information increased.” Hate speech and attacks by the government were directed towards certain groups, such as LGBT activists and Pride 2022 organizers, along with protesting farmers and environmental activists, he reported, adding that authorities targeted “critical media, journalists, and editors much more often and more harshly than towards political opponents.”

Panelists agreed that government officials openly repressed and censored journalists by preventing them from doing their jobs. According to panelists’ observations, media were often forbidden to attend public events such as the session of the Council in Grocka, the session of the Commission for Spatial Plans of Sremski Karlovac, and the opening of the Teachers Faculty building in Subotica. For a year-and-a-half, journalists at news outlet Danas were not able to question the mayor of Niš, who also ordered municipal employees not to make statements or talk to Danas reporters.

According to the [NUNS database](#), media workers are often physically attacked while performing journalism work. Media companies also experienced attacks on property. Panelists reported an incident in which office windows were smashed of a building housing three newsrooms: Glas Podrinja, Television Šabac, and the RTS correspondent office.

The case of OK Radio in Vranje demonstrates the treatment of journalists and the pressure against employees in professional local media. OK Radio (in Vranje) owner Olivera Vladković refused consent to the construction of an illegal gaming house, which required the windows of OK Radio’s newsroom to be forcibly bricked up. After her refusal, she and the newsroom staff received threats, and the premises of the radio station were attacked. The Vranje Basic Court sentenced the owner of the illegal building to 14 months in prison for violent behavior towards Vladković and her employees. However, by the end of 2022, the windows were still bricked up.

1 <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Izvestavanje-u-regionu-Najmanje-1-500-dezinformacija-za-150-dana-rata-u-Ukrajini-1071>

Hate speech is common in most Serbian print and online media. Most prevalent is content writers using derogatory names for members of certain nationalities, while others libel political opponents, critics from the civil society sector, and media representatives. Mihajlović noted, “More and more often, information is aimed at creating confusion among the audience, to conceal the true meaning of a news report] and to deceive citizens.”

National TV outlets, including Happy and Pink, broadcast programs that call for violence, normalize hate speech, glorify war criminals, and support ultra-right organizations. The [Institute for Media and Diversity studied the frequency of hate speech in Serbian media](#) and concluded that women are the most frequent targets, along with ethnic groups and the LGBT community.

Journalists often generate hate speech, but are also targets as well. Panelists said sanctions for hate speech are very rare, with even fewer convictions. The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), appointed by the National Assembly, is responsible for allocating frequencies and applying broadcasting laws, but [almost never takes action](#). REM’s yearly report on programs accessible to people with disabilities has not been published since 2019.

The Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation surveyed pro-government tabloid outlets from April to July 2022 and found almost 200 attacks on media critical of the government. On average, outlets published one article per day that discredited, insulted, or targeted all those who write critical reports about the authorities. Several articles also attacked the Press Council and NUNS. About 22 percent of those articles used the same or very similar words, which indicated that the tabloids ran ready-made articles from the same sources.

Serbia’s journalism associations are introducing initiatives to reduce threats on journalists and support freedom of the press. In October 2022,

the Protector of Citizens Ombudsman of Serbia launched the Platform for Recording Attacks and Pressures on Journalists, which was created in cooperation with 10 media and journalist associations.

According to Jana Jacić, an editor with the radio and online news outlet BOOM 93, “Media in Serbia that have a national presence are most often prone to unethical behavior.” The Press Council offers ethical self-regulation of news outlets, but it only covers print and online media; TV and radio outlets have no self-regulation. The Press

Council received 44 complaints of unethical offenses by journalists and outlets during the first six months of 2022. The most frequent offenses were related to discrimination against national minorities and the spread of stereotypes about these groups and publishing the identities of minors and children in reports on family tragedies. The Independent Journalists Association of Vojvodina (NDNV) has appealed to journalists, calling for them to respect the rules of reporting on personal tragedies.

Indicator 4: The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.

RTV and the National Minority Council produce programs in minority languages in the Vojvodina province, with longtime good coverage. Radio Belgrad offers a program in the Romani language, and RTS TV has a news program in Albanian. A number of Albanian- language media in the Preševo Valley in Bujanovac cover local topics and are editorially autonomous. The Bujanovac region leads the way in the number of media reporting in the national minority languages, with approximately 26 registered media. Commendably, the local governments where national minorities live offer bilingual reporting on their official websites.

Even though Serbia held elections in 2022, panelists observed that the majority of citizens were not exposed to diverse content. All national television stations worked in the interest of the government. Media still do not sufficiently represent the different experiences and viewpoints of

“ The advertising market on social networks and other media is not transparent. The majority of ad placement goes to media aligned with the government, and advertising in Serbia is highly politicized.

racial, ethnic, and religious affiliations that would permit reaching most Serbian citizens. All pro-government tabloids and television channels exclusively address the Serb majority community. Their coverage targets followers of the Orthodox Church and male viewers, while the presence of other communities is marginalized.

The media sector only includes rare offerings of Serbian language content produced by members of minority groups. One exception is the program *Paleta* on RTV, a daily television show. RTV's editors select the content, produce it in the languages of national minorities, and provide Serbian subtitles.

In new developments, RTS and the Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing of Serbia struck a deal in 2022. They are adapting the RT3 program *Dnevnik 2* to better meet the needs of people with hearing loss.

The Association of Independent Local Media's "Lokal Pres" research report showed that in 53 Serbian local media outlets, women make up 57 percent of newsroom employees—a sharp increase from 43 percent in 2016. The report stressed that "women journalists in local areas most often face discrimination when invited to local events; it is more difficult for them to reach male interlocutors; their salaries are at the level of the minimum wage; and they are exposed to insults more often than their colleagues, especially on social networks." The research noted that politicians make the most sexist comments to the public. Very few women report harassment. "As far as editorial and ownership functions are concerned, the majority of them are occupied by men, while the editorial offices are mostly occupied by female journalists," Radojević observed.

Media coverage of women is problematic. Reporting often includes stereotypical sexism, normalization of gender-based violence, and romanitizing femicide. Moreover, women's voices are often left out of reporting on various important social topics. Multiple cases of sexual violence occurred in 2022 where mainstream media took an unprofessional approach, including superficial analysis, relativization of violence, and shifting the responsibility from the abuser to the victim. Blaming women for Serbia's low birth rate is a popular trope heard on TV

programs and even from some ministers.

In 2022, a report by the group Journalists Against Violence revealed that between 2019 and 2021, Serbian media published more than 36,000 headlines about violence against women. In 40 percent of these articles, the media violated ethical rules by revealing the identity of victims or family members. In traditional and new media, women are still most often seen in the role of sex symbol, then wife, mother, or housewife. The general prevailing trend—that authorities do not react to violence against women—has contributed to the normalization of these acts. Tabloid headlines such as "I killed my love with a hammer" and "I had to kill her, I loved her very much" are common.

Most of the violence against women are reported by online outlets. The Serbian female activist Minja Marđonović was involved in a case of "digital murder," as she called it, in 2022. She published critical comments about the tabloid *Informer's* interview with a serial rapist². The next day, her email was hacked, and posts of child pornography appeared on her Facebook page. All three platforms she used (Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp) were immediately taken down, and she was marked as an ineligible user. With enormous efforts, and with the help of groups that address digital violence against women and activists, she managed to have all three accounts restored.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Serbian media funding sources—such as advertising, public funds, international donors, and commercial services—are unreliable and inconsistent. "Producers of professional content do not have enough funds to work," noted Mihajlović, "Apart from television N1 and NovaS³, which have stable financing, other professional media are facing a difficult financial situation. There is no apolitical financing, nor transparent distribution of public funds for the media." Co-financing

2 Serbia's Press Council later said that *Informer* violated the Serbian Journalists' Code by publishing the interview and called upon the tabloid to abide by professional standards.

3 N1 and NovaS—along with *Danas*, Serbia's daily newspaper of record—are part of the United Group, a company that operates telecommunications platforms and media outlets throughout southeastern Europe.

media projects have become one of the few sources of income for local and regional media.

In 2022, Serbia had 2,600 registered media outlets. Financing for local media is much more difficult to obtain than for national outlets. The local advertising market is almost non-existent, as all large companies mainly advertise in the national media or on major social networks.

Local media are at the mercy of project co-financing with municipalities, and local governments mainly reward loyal media with co-financing. In this way, project financing has turned into a political tool, instead of primarily serving the public interest. This type of funding tends to go to state-backed print and television tabloids instead of reaching professional journalists, as prescribed by law.

An investigative series by online media outlet Subotičke.rs uncovered many forms of fraud in local co-financing projects. The investigations identified some media commission members as involved with government organized non-government organizations (GONGOs) that media owners have established. The investigators also found media content copied from Wikipedia; other conflict of interest cases in which representatives of outlets awarded funds to their own programs; and no type of project evaluations after completion. Panelists observed that the municipalities Bela Palanka, Čićevac, and Varvarin exemplify the paradoxes of co-financing: They all allocated fund tenders for co-financing media projects in their towns, even though none of the outlets were registered in their territories.

In early 2022, the OSCE Mission to Serbia, the Center for Sustainable Communities, and the Ministry of Culture and Information presented its database on media project co-financing in Serbia from 2015 to 2021. The database contains 14,000 approved media projects by all local authorities, submitted by more than 1,600 applicants. The database is completely open and can be used by the media members, media associations, state institutions, and citizens.

Media outlets find donor funds increasingly difficult to secure, as the panelists pointed out. They explained that foreign donors do not understand that Serbian media workers, especially in local media,

cannot manage the extensive administration required to obtain donor projects. Some institutional donors are permitted only to give funds to NGOs, which results in NGOs engaging media units as subcontractors. The panelists emphasized the need to review donor media programs and their responsiveness to the realities of Serbian professional media, and how well the programs cover current important priorities. Panelists also recommended creating donor projects designed to increase media participation and thus improve the media environment. Regional media representatives on the VIBE panel advocated for this approach to help alleviate pressures that smaller, non-Belgrade-based media face with local authorities and operating resources.

Panelists noted that crowdfunding for media is on the rise. KRIK, whose stories mainly focus on crime and corruption, has seen gains: the greater the risks and attacks the outlet faces from politicians, the greater the attention and donations they receive. Seven years after asking readers to sign up and donate, now 25 percent of KRIK's annual income comes from readers, who are offered free access or gifts and exclusive content in exchange. To be sustainable, this approach demands constant production of relevant content and continuous promotion to followers.

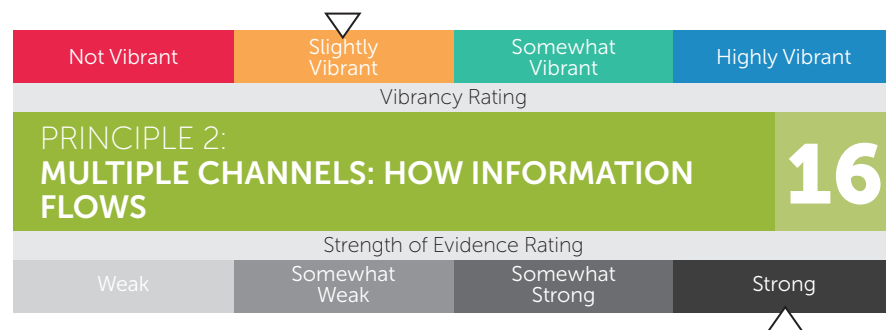
The advertising market on social networks and other media is not transparent. The majority of ad placement goes to media aligned with the government, and advertising in Serbia is highly politicized. Pro-government media also get direct state subsidies. In July 2022, REM extended the licenses for four national television stations (Pink, Happy, Prva and B92). These outlets violated Serbia's Advertising Act 1,430 times during May 2022 alone, almost 50 times a day without serious ramifications.⁴ For the entire presidential election campaign, Vučić spent around €6 million (\$6.6 million), (14 times more than his competitor). €1.5 (\$1.6 million) went to advertising on Pink television. According to [Transparency Serbia](#), data published on election campaign finance indicated that €660,000 (\$723,000) went to advertising on Radio-Television of Serbia; €649,000 (\$711,000) went to Prva television; and €620,000 (\$680,000) to print media. All the winners of the largest

4 <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/cetiri-nacionalne-televizije-za-samo-mesec-dana-1430-puta-prekrsile-zakon-o-oglasavanju/>

amounts are under the clear control of the ruling party.

In July 2022, the Trade Union of Journalists of Serbia (SINOS) conducted a study of journalist income and found that salaries are not enough to live on, and journalists are forced to look for additional work. One reason is trade union organizations are not strong enough to improve journalists’ socio-economic position. In one study, 88 percent of respondents were not trade union members, while 95 percent were members of some journalism association and believed that only these associations represent their interests.

Regional journalists’ standard of living is even more endangered. In the Rasina district, journalist monthly earnings are 25 to 40 percent lower than the average salary there, according to a Center for Investigative Journalism in Kruševac survey conducted during June and July 2022.



While Serbia has media-related laws that are up to European standards, their implementation is weak, and journalists work with little legal protections. For example, ownership of media is regulated by law, but numerous abuses have led to ownership concentration and influence over the media. Overall, the country’s media infrastructure is strong, with broadcast and internet coverage reaching most regions, which led to panelists giving this indicator their highest scores for this principle. Given the level of influence exerted on editorial content by owners and financiers, panelists were very critical of the indicator on independent information channels, which scored the lowest at 8. They also scored very low the indicator that examines people’s rights to create, share, and consume information.

Indicator 6: People have rights to create, share and consume information.

Serbia’s laws relating to the media sector are generally adequate and in line with European democratic standards. However, just as reported in last year’s VIBE, lawmakers did not implement any frameworks to govern freedom of expression or freedom of the media in 2022. “There are no substantive mechanisms to protect journalists,” noted Mihajlović, “Formally, there are laws, but they are not implemented.” Government officials use every press conference to attack dissident journalists. Consequently, media staff engage in a high degree of self-censorship.

Public officials’ constant targeting of certain critical media and journalists has been particularly pronounced, even despite international organizations, domestic journalism associations, and NGOs urging officials to refrain from attacks. Professional media were countersued by politicians in almost 60 percent of court cases.

Often, the judiciary does not understand the role of media and journalists in a democratic society. During 2022, only a few court cases concerning threats and attacks on journalists were resolved quickly, and all of those were suits of private individuals.

The Council of Europe report published in March 2022 warned that Serbia ranks among the highest of all countries surveyed, with the most threats to journalists. On World Press Freedom Day 2022, organized by UNESCO in Serbia, speakers revealed that journalists are experiencing a continual increase in attacks, death threats, and defamatory campaigns. Often attackers target journalists’ families, as was the case of NDNV Media Hub’s program director. His family members, including his wife and sister, were explicitly threatened.

In December 2022 and following other professional media outlets and journalists’ associations earlier withdrawals, the UNS Assembly decided to leave the Working Group on the Safety and Protection of Journalists, established by the Serbian government in 2020, because the government did not fulfill its promise of protecting journalists from politicians’ attacks. Marković, who also been targeted by politicians,

remarked, “The murders and then burning of Milan Jovanović’s house remained unsolved. Murders are forgotten and drastic cases are not solved. The working group for the safety of journalists is farcical and counterproductive because we sit and discuss with them, and this does not serve to improve the safety of journalists, but rather serves to confuse the public.”

In the panelists’ view, the wide spectrum of attacks on media that criticize the government produces an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship, down to the smallest media outlet. Journalists in local media have been more exposed to pressure and threats, and now working in local media is more difficult than even in the 1990s during the Yugoslav wars, the panelists reported.

The most common consequences of controversial reporting are threats to journalists, which can be uttered publicly, or more often, through social networks and tabloid campaigns.

The Serbian NGO Citizen Initiatives became a member of the Coalition Against SLAPP (strategic lawsuits against public participation) in Europe. The group aims to expose and fight the use of lawsuits to bully and intimidate journalists into silence. In early 2022, KRIK faced 10 ongoing SLAPP court proceedings filed by powerful authorities against the company and its journalists, to divert the organization from its work. On October 20, 2022, the coalition awarded Serbia the title of the “SLAPP Country of the Year.” Many judges in Serbia are unaware that SLAPP lawsuits are deliberately aimed at hindering journalists from reporting on controversial topics. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) called on Serbia to implement anti-SLAPP measures recommended by the European Union.

Indicator 7: People have adequate access to channels of information.

Serbia’s media infrastructure meets the needs of most people, with TV and radio coverage and internet services available in the majority of the country. The panelists noted that Serbia, more than many developed countries, is covered by cable operators. According to the Statistical

Office of the Republic of Serbia, 95 percent of households in the country have a mobile phone, 98.5 percent have a television, and 77 percent have a computer. All businesses in Serbia have an internet connection.

With regard to “use of ICT 2022,” the Statistical Office’s survey indicates that 88 percent of urban households have an internet connection, along with 76 percent of rural households. According to the same survey, only 67 percent of households in rural regions have a computer. A current conflict between Telekom Serbia and Serbia Broadband (SBB) has resulted in some urban users having two optical connections, which is not only irrational, but is detrimental to infrastructure development in rural areas.

The report also noted that 98 percent of Serbian households with an income higher than €600 (\$663) a month have an internet connection. Approximately 71 percent of households with an income of less than €400 (\$442) a month, and only 33 percent of those with an income of less than €250 (\$276), have internet. Many rural citizens are not interested in broadband and cable due to the expense, and they turn to terrestrial television and mobile internet for coverage.

Research conducted by the Center for the Creation of Policies and Strategies shows that 94 percent of young people in Serbia get most of their information from social networks, while the smallest percentage of respondents get information through television (4.7 percent), and print media (0.6 percent). The Youth in the Media Mirror survey, conducted by the Youth Umbrella Organization of Serbia, shows year after year that the stereotypical pattern of Serbia’s mainstream media coverage of youth depicts the image of violent, drunken young men under the influence of drugs, as well as promiscuous girls. Other types of youths outside this stereotype are ignored. Public service broadcasters, and especially news media, have no political content for young people.

Freedom House’s “Internet Freedom 2022” report ranks Serbia as a “free” country compared with 70 countries, or 89 percent of internet users in the world. But the nation faces challenges, and the report rates it low in the section on disinformation.

Serbian authorities do not restrict access to media and rarely block

websites. Occasionally, internet users are detained for nefarious online activities, but most often do not face rigorous punishment from authorities. Serbia has a high level of access, a low level of blocking, and low penalties for unaccountable online activities.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Panelists agreed that Serbia's law for the right to access public information guarantees access, but frequently the law is not upheld. For example, UNS asked the information office of the City Municipality of Grocka why the sessions of the city's Municipal Council were closed to the public. Officials claimed they decided to close the sessions to prevent arbitrary interpretation and public presentation of their information and views. Isakov points out that, "The government often avoids answering questions of public importance. The media then get information through the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance, which at best only complicates the work and prolongs the research process."

In 2022, the Serbian research organization BIRODI presented the results of a [10-month survey](#). This study showed that the constitutionally guaranteed right of citizens to objective, complete, timely, and truthful government information is "to a great extent threatened" because citizens consume [propaganda and promotion](#) that is missing critical evaluation of the government's work.

During the process of integrating into the EU, Serbia was required to increase government transparency, but this directive is often ignored. The Commissioner for Information of Public Importance announced that the number of complaints about data protection and obtaining information of public importance has skyrocketed—in 2022, it received 10,000 complaints, more than twice the average of 4,000 per year.

"When it comes to free access to information, neither the Ministry of

Finance nor the Treasury Board are absolutely responsive and thus prevent a transparent insight into the spending of public money," according to journalist N.J., who did not wish to use her full name, "We cannot monitor either how the [taxpayer] money is distributed, nor how money flows towards state institutions and private companies. It is impossible to obtain data on private foreign investments that drastically change the entire natural environment in parts of Serbia."

No group is systematically excluded from exercising the right to information. However, knowledge of that right appears to be low among Serbian citizens, as is their understanding about how to even request information.

Panelists agreed that Serbia's law for the right to access public information guarantees access, but frequently the law is not upheld.

In the panelists' experience, government representatives have a permanent ban from appearing on the so-called "critical media," which disallows these outlets from publishing both sides or conducting professional interviews with officials. Skrozza noted that in other cases,

government officials agree to a studio interview, and then cancel at the last minute. She commented that citizens become ill informed when officials continually ignore the media. "A multi-year trend that escalated in 2022 is that government representatives absolutely do not talk to journalists of professional media, which is discrimination contrary to the law," she explained.

Politicians tend to ignore the professional media, as do representatives of state institutions and experts who are loath to answer journalists' questions. State institutions require questions to be in writing, and officials usually give general answers. Journalists can provide consumers with quality information through personal research, but their work is difficult to undertake when they have no possibility of direct contact with sources. In addition, all contacts with journalists are centralized by the state institutions.

Panelists noted that the government has spokespersons and information offices, but they often give useless answers to journalist questions.

Government spokespersons repeat what they are told by their superiors. When news outlet *Južne vesti* asked government officials why the tabloid *Informer* was able to publish an extensive interview with a serial rapist, the officials answered that *Južne vesti* systematically attacks the authority of President Vučić and undermines his function. This is a narrative that is used against journalists throughout Serbia whenever they ask challenging questions.

Top officials speak directly at press conferences or more often in multi-hour broadcasts on national television, where they conduct monologues and occasionally answer pre-approved questions. In 2022, a trend arose where ministries began making their own media reports and taking their own videographers to public events.

Instead of speaking with journalists who post their analysis of events on websites, ministries with their own media always present their actions and viewpoints in a positive way. If somebody asks an unpleasant question at a recorded event, it is excluded from the published report.

Jacić pointed out that this trend has spread from the ministries to local municipalities. In Požarevac, the mayor and members of its council use social networks to communicate with journalists, rather than answering questions directly. These officials post announcements and photos, Jacić said, but they do not give journalists the opportunity to communicate. She gave the example of when public company representatives ask important questions concerning the local environment, and local leaders do not give concrete answers. Thus, the relationship between media, Belgrade authorities, and the local communities becomes equally flawed, she added.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Members of the ruling party own a large number of local media outlets. Although ownership of media is regulated by law, numerous abuses have led to ownership concentration and influence over the media. Despite the law that was passed two decades ago prohibiting state ownership of media, the government owns quite a few outlets.

A serious problem arising from ignoring media ownership law is the activity of the state-owned Telekom Srbija cable company, a key outlet for the ruling regime. Telekom “recognized” control over five private television stations, which is a violation of domestic laws that require the state to withdraw from media ownership.

Serbia still has not adopted a law on media ownership transparency, despite the EU’s recommendations and the efforts of civil society. Anyone can identify formal owners of a given media outlet by searching the APR (*Agencija za privredne register*) website. The site is run by the Serbian Business Registers Agency, a state organization registering all economic units established in Serbia. Registering is obligated by law.

However, the site cannot be searched by a person’s name—only by the outlet name or a registration number—which hinders determining how many media outlets an individual owns.

👂👂 **Members of the ruling party own a large number of local media outlets.**

REM’s inefficiency has led to issues surrounding media transparency and the state’s unlawful media ownership. The regulator does not monitor or punish broadcasters that act illegally, and its process of allocating radio and TV frequencies is not transparent and is highly partisan. No independent or critical media were awarded national broadcasting licenses at any time during 2022. But in July, REM again granted all four of Serbia’s national TV frequencies to the same television stations that are close to the government (Pink, Prva, Happy, and B92)—causing a public outcry. REM explicitly broke the law and code of journalism when awarding frequencies to these outlets, because they all had been cited for violations in the past. The Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation and the Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA) filed a lawsuit against REM for its award process.

REM did open up bidding for a fifth TV frequency for eight years; the decision was expected by December 2022, but officials made no announcements. “The privilege of having a national frequency was also retained by channels whose programming is almost exclusively based on reality programs,” said Radojević, “The process of allocating the remaining fifth frequency is still not completed, and this process has

been marked by numerous controversies.”

TV Nova S and N1 protested the lack of a decision by blacking out their screens for 24 hours with the message, “Darkness in Serbia without free media.” REM responded to criticism by going on strike, exemplifying the obedience of state institutions to political demands.

“The quality of public service information is getting worse, topics of public interest are not covered, nor are important social issues raised,” according to journalist N.J., “There is no room for political debate and opposition, except for the dominant ruling narrative. Public television has almost no cultural or educational program. The dominant shows are quizzes and shows about cooking, the countryside, and sports.”

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Through financial support, owners dominate the media and dictate editorial attitudes. During 2022 there were several important changes in media ownership, backed by the government, that have worsened the media environment. In May, the owner of the daily newspaper *Večernje Novosti*, businessman Boban Rajić, bought half of the ownership in the oldest daily newspaper *Politika*, while the state still owns the other half. Adria Media Group (which owns the pro-regime tabloid *Kurir*) became the exclusive partner of the Euraktiv Network (which covers EU integration), and the Russian state television outlet *Russia Today* launched a Serbian language site, RT Balkan. “Owners influence the media,” confirmed panelist Mihajlović, “The source of funding influences the editorial policy, especially state organizations.” Petković agreed: “Media supported by the government do not have independence in reporting and are not independent.”

During the 2022 elections, [Serbian research firm BIRODI announced](#) that the most visited websites for election information were [n1info.rs](#) (a partner with CNN International)--with 18 percent of the Serbian public visiting--and [Nova.rs](#), with nine percent. RTS had the largest TV election information viewership, with 39 percent of the public--followed by Pink with 26 percent, Prva Srpska Televizija with 25 percent, and Happy with 16 percent. All of these were the stations where President Vučić spent

the most money on advertising during the election campaign. During the election campaign, from March 2 to 16, President Vučić appeared on 27 programs, with a total duration of 32 minutes on RTS’s *Dnevnik 2* program. Prime Minister Ana Brnabić appeared on four programs, with a total duration of six minutes.

Both public services, RTS and RTV, are poorly financed. Since 2016, both outlets have received funding from citizens’ income taxes and the Serbian state budget. The fee increases from year to year, so RTS was excluded from the 2021 and 2022 budgets, while RTV is still partially financed from the budget. RTS income from marketing was particularly high in 2022 due to the exclusive transmission of the FIFA World Cup.

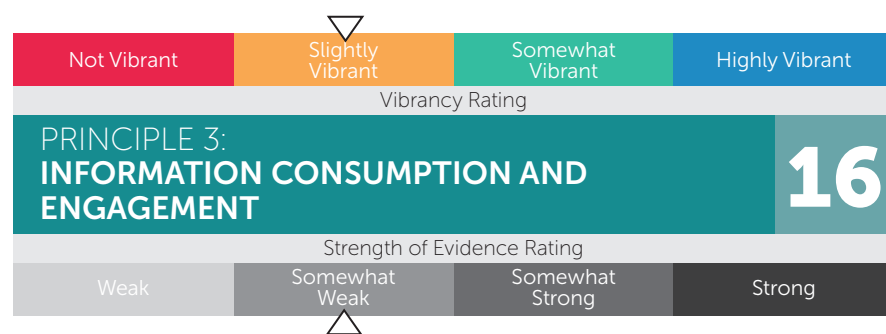
Parliamentary politicians appoint all members of regulatory bodies—leaving them far from apolitical. Panelists agreed that in 2022, REM’s independence has further deteriorated and continues with almost complete control by the ruling parties. Independent media experts, professional journalists, and observers on the panel expressed that REM does not perform its work as defined by law. It protects the narrow interests of private broadcasters and the ruling structures, rather than the interests of Serbian citizens.

Due to REM’s shortcomings, the Serbian public is deprived of objective and timely information, panelists lamented. However, REM’s professional staff members have made some regulatory progress: They found commercial television stations with national frequencies violated the Advertising Act (allowing a maximum of 12 minutes of commercials per hour) as many as 3,491 times from April to July 2022. REM submitted 5,327 cases of violations of the law to the misdemeanor court in Belgrade.

The Regulatory Agency for Electronic Communications and Postal Services (RATEL), which worked for years as an effective regulator, remained completely silent concerning the multi-year dispute between Telekom Srbija and SBB, the two largest cable and broadband operators in Serbia. In 2022, state-backed Telekom aggressively attacked SBB, offering SBB users legal aid and financial compensation if they switched to Telekom. In an unscrupulous campaign, they set up Telekom

mobile phone stands directly in front of SBB branches and in local government buildings where the public does business. RATEL did not react to these aggressive moves, nor did it try to restore regularity in the media content distribution market. RATEL did not fulfill either of its two basic missions: to ensure fair market competition and to protect the telecommunications and media services users. REM also did not point out these unfair business practices; on the contrary, it supported Telekom in its efforts to prevent the expansion of the SBB network. “Regulatory bodies are not independent and act according to the dictates of politics,” Mihajlović confirmed.

Formally, media outlets should be treated equally. In reality, however, officials often provide pro-state media exclusive access to certain information. For example, access to Bureau of Statistics data is free to the public by law. But independent media have a hard time obtaining such information from state sources, and often must seek help from the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance.



Professional media, together with investigative centers and civil initiatives, succeeded in offering reliable information that has been neglected by mainstream media. Facility with technology tools is improving, but digital hygiene tools and skills are still lacking. Moreover, media and information literacy skills are still low throughout the country; to increase media literacy, the government will likely have to make more serious investments. As a result, panelists gave their lowest score for this principle to the indicator on media literacy.

Indicator 11: People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.

In 2022, Serbia had no publicly known systematic violation of citizens’ rights to privacy. However, isolated cases arose, such as the unauthorized collection of personal data published in tabloid media outlets.

The panelists pointed out that most journalists do not have mobile phones issued to them by their employers that are subject to security protocols and periodic checks. They conduct private and business communication from the same device, including confidential conversations with sources. Digital safety protocols depend on an individual journalist’s personal preferences, because most media still do not have official procedures for protection. “Controlling mobile phone [data privacy] is important for the safety of journalists,” according to journalist N.J., “The protection of a journalist’s source in the context of biometric surveillance can be dangerous for the work of journalists, because their contacts can be revealed, threatening the source’s secrecy.” Legal protection for data privacy exists but is widely abused, said Mihajlovic, who added that journalists can access digital security tools, but they are expensive and smaller media cannot afford them.

In 2022, the OSCE’s report “Digital Competences of Journalists” shows the majority of respondents are aware of the importance of using digital technologies and their impact on media. Journalists also have accepted new standards of professional practice and actively acquire new knowledge and skills. According to the report, journalists have solid abilities with using and managing social networks. Their most developed skills are digital communication with others; internet searching and content downloading, and organizing the information found; and critically evaluating the reliability of internet sources and information. The study revealed the least developed skills are information fact-checking and photo authentication, both of which are key in combating fake news.

The report also showed that the media sector is underdeveloped in using statistical and analytical data on audience reactions to published

content. In Serbia, approximately two-thirds of the interviewed journalists produce digital content on a daily basis, exemplifying the changes taking place in the media in terms of digitization.

Panelists noted that several cyber attacks were registered in 2022. In April, the Beta News Agency website was offline due to intense hacker attacks. In November, multiple media outlets reported that a cyber attack was underway on many internet infrastructure areas in Serbia. UNS has created a guideline for journalists on digital security, entitled “Don’t risk, protect data,” which instructs media professionals on how to preserve personal data privacy.

According to research on digital competences by the NGO Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID), Serbia’s digital literacy index in 2022 was 10.68 out of 15, which can be rated as good. But that number is slightly lower than last year’s 11.01, and 2019’s score of 10.97. The CeSID survey’s media literacy index for 2022 is 3.96 out of 6, which is better than in the last two years, but worse than in 2019 when the score was 4.07. This research also records progress in internet security, and its results show that the older population is significantly lagging.

Panelists held that Serbians have kept the greatest media trust in personal contacts, followed by television along with internet portals and social networks. According to the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) survey “Trust in Media 2022,” Serbian citizens trust radio the least, which is completely opposite that of most of Europe, who trust radio the most. Moreover, when compared to the rest of Europe, Serbians trust the internet and social networks the most, and European citizens trust these media the least, confirming the Serbian public’s skepticism towards the controlled media.

Indicator 12: People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.

Media literacy in Serbia’s educational curricula is only just beginning,

and low media literacy skills has been a major impediment in reforming society. The Ministry of Education offers an elective class on language, media and culture for elementary school students, and numerous NGOs and donors emphasize media literacy programs to develop a more democratic civil society in Serbia. Serbia’s problem is not only media illiteracy, but also functional illiteracy. The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts’ 2021 research, “Key Data on Education in Serbia,” found that between 40 and 50 percent of 15-year-olds are functionally illiterate.

Media literacy in Serbia’s educational curricula is only just beginning, and low media literacy skills has been a major impediment in reforming society.

The tabloid media audience is broad and unquestionably believes what is produced in those media, Jacić pointed out. She thinks that improvement is only possible by educating people in media literacy. “We need to implement media literacy as an important method of social reform,” she said. “The Ministry of Education’s current

solution of introducing pro forma media literacy as an optional subject is absolutely insufficient.”

The development of critical thinking has been entering the republic’s education system in recent years through optional programs that are multidisciplinary and project oriented. In the 2022 school year, the free teaching activity “Media Literacy” has been offered to students in the fifth or sixth grade of elementary school.

In 2022, a large number of media literacy training programs on information literacy and critical thinking were held all over Serbia. Moreover, the Institute for the Advancement of Education, with the help of the US Embassy in Belgrade, created the online training, “Our students in the world of critical thinking and media literacy,” which was accredited as a training of national importance. This program’s second training round was held in 2022, and its manual on media literacy is available to all users on the Institute’s website.

“Something needs to be done,” said Skrozza, “In elementary school, they give 30-minute lectures on media literacy. But the very next day, children

are bombarded with lies and propaganda about other nations and other religions. So, there is no system that would improve media literacy, because the activities aimed at promoting media illiteracy are stronger.”

The new Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) publication “Handbook for Media Quick Fact-Checking,” which came out in 2022, provides guidelines for the process of checking information before editing. The manual also contains useful tools for searching and fact-checking information. This resource is practical and easy to use, panelists said, and they believe it could be useful for civil sector activists and all citizens.

Indicator 13: People engage productively with the information that is available to them.

Panelists agreed that independent media and professional journalists use their freedom of speech and rights to information, despite authorities’ strong efforts to limit the availability of information. In 2022, a counterbalance arose between information availability over massive misinformation distributed by public officials, which led journalists and CSOs to increase their free speech activism. The trend is mostly due to journalists increasing their research capabilities, several independent media outlets strengthening their activity, and investigative units further improving their skills, along with activity of opposition MPs and CSOs.

Stakeholders sponsored a greater number of public forums in 2022 than in previous years. These debates were organized by media, media associations, or NGOs. Unfortunately, public officials at all levels absolutely refused to participate. Discussion platforms are very rare and are prepared mostly in advance, so they do not allow for a range of opinions.

Once-numerous radio and TV shows with viewers’ phone comments have almost completely disappeared, and the few that remain do not include multiple viewpoints. Even Nova S’s popular TV program *Impression of the Week* only includes comments by viewers who are not

in favor of the government. For its part, government representatives substitute debates with “one person” TV shows with no pre-planned questions. Independent media in local cities organize discussions, which are especially important, and are growing in popularity among local citizens.

Panelists said that debates initiated on social networks have not changed authorities’ behavior, but debaters regularly attack state representatives, tabloids, and opposition members of parliament who put forward different viewpoints, and on media that broadcast alternative views. Inappropriate speech, hate speech, and misinformation, as well as serious threats, are constantly present on social networks and media outlets.

Indicator 14: Media and Information producers engage with their audience’s needs.

Some media try to understand the needs and interests of their potential audience. But only large, corporate media are able to research audience satisfaction, while smaller local and professional media cannot afford to do so. Social networks can determine reader profiles quite well. However, most media outlets do not have the funding to hire someone to edit and analyze reactions on social networks. The Serbian media reality is that it offers more tools and information than staff have capacity to use.

The panelists pointed out that they were unaware of any media conducting a detailed audience survey for topic preferences in 2022. Most media delve into established topics that editors consider important. A number of media use detailed analysis of visits and feedback from online platforms.

In December 2022, RTS’s Program Council held a public debate on its program content in Kragujevac, Vranje, and Belgrade. These sessions could help RTS improve its position, which, according to general opinion, is far from its legally prescribed mission to host debates with participants

“People are thirsty for local information to find out what is happening in their area,” said Nikola Lazić, editor-in-chief of Bujanovačke.

who have opinions outside of the ruling regime’s propaganda.

Open debates among citizens, politicians, and media actors take place on social networks, where many express opinions that do not contribute to political discussions, and instead lead to further conflicts. Confrontations played out on social networks occasionally outgrow the networks and are transferred to in-person life.

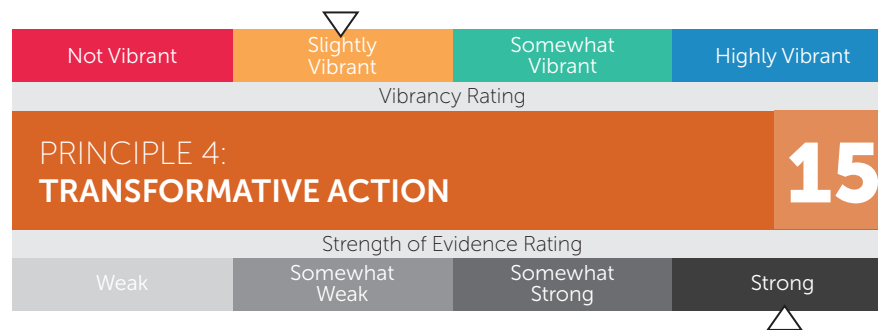
Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

Serbia has no community-based media with volunteers or audience donations. Functioning in their place are a few private, local outlets that keep a professional approach to local problems, in spite of enormous economic, political, and criminal pressures. Serbia does not have many of these outlets, but they play an extraordinary role in local areas, panelists said. “People are thirsty for local information to find out what is happening in their area,” said Nikola Lazić, editor-in-chief of *Bujanovačke*, “Our innovations, short clips that directly convey current events in our town, achieve a very high viewership. Only those [journalists] that work in the public interest are real local media similar to classical community media.”

These local outlets are a small percentage of the 2,600 registered media, but credible ones are useful for citizens and marginalized populations in local areas. Serbia has more local private media outlets financed by the state, and under the direct influence of the authorities, that spread propaganda, with pronounced self-censorship for public-interest topics.

The two most common problems local media face are refusal of official information from institutions that offer no access to independent media, and authorities’ attempts to discredit and diminish the importance of local media reports. A prime example is the Portal Kruševac Press’s project on violence against women, financed by the City of Kruševac. The region’s Center for Social Work, police department, and hospital all ignored the project, even though violence against women is a major issue for the Kruševac community.

Local media suffer from poor financial support from local institutions. Issues surrounding project co-financing and the trend of frequent SLAPP lawsuits seriously threaten local independent media’s financial and personnel capacity. The current political system has made project co-financing meaningless, while intended to help local media cover local community topics. However, according to Marković, “Competitions for the co-financing of media content of public interest have been transformed into undisguised financing of local media suitable for local authorities.”



Unfortunately, Serbian society is divided, and political officials are furthering that division to influence their supporters and discourage the opposition. The government’s actions concerning corruption showed that information was used to undermine steps to combat dishonesty. CSOs continued their activities and media cooperation to take transformative actions. As a result, the indicator on civil society’s use of quality information received this principle’s highest score of 23. Two indicators—government’s use of information and information’s support of good governance and democratic rights—tied for the lowest score of 10.

Indicator 16: Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.

A relatively small number of citizens use multiple sources of information. It is unknown how many people follow several types of media of different

ideological preferences. Research centers and a few independent professional media offer Serbia non-partisan sources of news. Research centers continued their breakthrough in 2022 by publishing study results—which are difficult to refute, so they are not welcomed by authorities. But their popularity among citizens is growing, especially on social networks, where access to them is not prohibited.

Citizens increasingly avoid public discussions on various topics—most often, they belong to circles of like-minded people. Lively public debates occur on certain topics; for example, the adoption of local urban plans or ecological projects. However, on a broader level, when strategic, developmental, or important political problems are at stake, public debate is absent.

As a rule, people debate issues on social networks. However, these exchanges devolve into insults and exchanging opinions that are not based on facts. “Debates started on social networks are, as a rule, heated and unconstructive; they often disqualify a person, and target dissenters instead of challenging their attitudes,” said Isakov.

Indicator 17: Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.

Political views and attitudes are formed mainly based on misinformation—not quality information. According to a 2022 CRTA poll, as many as four out of five Serbian citizens believe that the role of the media in shaping political attitudes is very or mostly important; 55 percent of citizens think that the media in Serbia are under significant political influence. As much as 39 percent of citizens respect credible experts the most. Many citizens (43 percent) think that NGOs protect the public interest and fight for positive changes in society, while 28 percent disagree.⁵

CRTA’s 2022 report, “Political Attitudes of Serbian Citizens,” found that 62 percent are still mostly informed about political and social issues through television, and 40 percent through internet portals. RTS is the

most watched television station in Serbia, and Blic.rs is the most read online news site, according to the study. Slightly more than half of those surveyed, 56 percent, trust only pro-government television, 18 percent trust only TV outlets critical of the government, and 11 percent watch both. The study noted no major changes in citizen trust in pro-government and critical media. However, in less than seven days in June, more than 60,000 citizens signed a petition against assigning a national TV frequency to tabloid outlets Pink and Happy, showing dissatisfaction with these outlets’ programming.

Citizens cannot engage with elected officials, due to Serbia’s proportional electoral system at all levels of government. Rather than direct votes to elect representatives, the proportional electoral system means that citizens vote for a ballot named after the party leader and not for specific individuals. Such a proportional electoral system makes it impossible for citizens to recognize or communicate with the elected representatives before and after they are elected.

According to the 2022 “New Literacy” study by CeSID, USAID, and research firm Propulsion, Serbian citizens spend about 100 minutes a day on social networks, 57 minutes listening to the radio, and 28 minutes a day reading news. Many citizens do not distinguish propaganda from quality information. The study revealed that almost half of the respondents rarely or never check sources of information, and citizens have a higher trust in information they receive through personal contacts (76 percent). The majority of young people in Serbia obtain information through mobile phone apps, using Instagram the most. Four-fifths of them believe they know how to recognize fake news, and two-thirds said that fake news is problematic for society.

Panelists criticized the government for the way it handled the COVID-19 pandemic—from the beginning when the president mocked the dangers of COVID in a direct TV address, to his later dramatic warnings that there would not be enough burial places for those who died from the virus. Misinformation was spread on social networks, other media, and among citizens, especially anti-vaxxer campaigns, with limited government intervention to stop the disinformation. Panelists agreed that the government’s approach to COVID was responsible for this year’s

5 <https://cрта.rs/en/opinion-poll-political-attitudes-of-citizens-of-serbia-fall-2022/>

resistance to MMR vaccinations. Now many citizens are skeptical of any vaccinations and are boycotting them.

The coronavirus pandemic experiences have shown that Serbians are very inclined to risk their own health, as well as the health of the people around them, after being exposed to misinformation they encounter in the public sphere.

Indicator 18: Civil society uses quality information to improve their communities.

CSOs gladly share their information, but media use of reliable information is polarized. Serbian government officials consider CSOs as “enemy” organizations and often use government-run media to attack them for criticizing the regime. In 2022, after numerous protests, a petition signed by 38,000 Serbs was submitted to parliament to ban lithium mining. Parliament did not act on the initiative until the end of the year, and public service media did not consider it important enough to cover. Such a successful grassroots initiative, with many citizens standing up for their rights, is extremely rare, yet the government and authorities ignored it.

“Serbian government officials consider CSOs as “enemy” organizations and often use government-run media to attack them for criticizing the regime.

Civil society action is significantly less visible than the activities of political institutions and the government. More GONGOs openly support the regime, claiming to represent the “civil sector.” They now extract a large amount of funding from the state budget, and their information is often irrelevant and nonfactual—they abuse, destabilize, and violate freedom of speech, freedom of organization, and activism, panelists charged.

Some CSOs, which employ quality investigative journalists, use their research results to reduce the spread of misinformation or malicious information. They are in the minority, but their influence is rising. CSOs disseminate research results that uncover corruption, and present previously unknown data to citizens about various issues and

development, including reforms and political proposals. The problem is that their findings are not effectively distributed across the country, as dominant media do not broadcast them. Results are more visible on social networks.

However, readers abroad have access to this research and writing, so CSO representatives have received international awards. In 2022, Serbian investigative journalist Stevan Dojčinović from CSO KRIK received the U.S. State Department’s Anti-Corruption Champions Award, dedicated to individuals who have shown leadership, courage, and influence in preventing, exposing and fighting corruption.

Citizen and CSO involvement in decision-making processes has improved somewhat now that the government has invited CSOs to join the process of preparing new legal provisions. In the panelists’ view, this CSO involvement serves as a mere political card for the government,

given that political rulers’ ultimately final decisions. For example, in early 2022 the Serbian government adopted the long-awaited constitutional amendment to the Law on Referendum and People’s Initiative. That law helped environmental organizations formally present their protests to authorities. Under pressure,

the government canceled the Jadar lithium and boron mining project. However, immediately after the April 2022 election, a new government campaign began, claiming that abandoning lithium mining was the wrong decision and that it offers positive development opportunities for Serbia. This backtracking characterizes the government’s attitude towards the civil sector, expert opinions, and citizen participation in making key decisions.

A similar occurrence surrounded the 2021 Law on the Police, which introduced reforms. But after the 2022 election, parliament revised the law, giving greater powers to the police, including the right to break into private apartments without a court order.

Indicator 19: Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.

Serbian authorities have consultative mechanisms, but they are misused or ignored. Government ministers, municipalities, and city councils do not regularly hold press conferences. Journalists' questions are limited mostly to pro-government perspectives and questions are presented to back government positions. If a professional journalist succeeds in asking a question outside that format, an official will first deny any problems raised by the question, then discredit the journalist, the media outlet, and its owners.

Government officials usually explain decision making with a figurehead speaking on national television. Political discourse and debate occasionally contain references to evidence and facts, but most often do not. Political debate does not exist in traditional media (specifically television), since no members of the opposition are included in political programming. As a result, debate mostly occurs on social networks where everything is allowed. The average media consumer has no mechanism to distinguish fact from opinion.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Panelists agreed that corruption is a major problem in Serbia, and officials systematically ignore instances of corruption that the media uncover. Mostly minor corruption is dealt with by authorities, while major cases do not face any consequences. "The status of whistleblowers is very bad," noted journalist N.J., "There is absolutely no example of publicly announced cases of corruption producing any action by the authorities, other than attacks on the whistleblower, the media, and the journalists who published the [misdeeds]."

In practice, Serbian law offers no protections for whistleblowers. "The discovery of corruption, and violations of human and civil rights, still

does not lead to a change in government practices," Isakov pointed out, "Corrupt officials are protected by government institutions that cover up wrongdoings, delay proceedings, and attack whistleblowers. The government defends its own at all costs, so investigations, indictments, and court processes drag on for months and years, according to the government's propaganda needs."

Panelists agreed that investigative journalists are the only ones looking into and uncovering crimes and corruption. They are actually doing the work of prosecutors, since the government normally ignores their discoveries. The award-winning editor of the KRIK, Stevan Dojčinović, created a public, searchable database on corruption, which has become the cornerstone for journalists, activists, prosecutors, and citizens for researching criminality.

Essentially, government prosecutors and the police ignore media reports on corruption and human rights violations, and they tend to focus their investigations on minor cases not involving highly ranked officials. Instead, international associations—such as European Federation of Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, and Article 19 Europe—read news reports and put pressure on the Serbian authorities for repercussions. Street protests and public gatherings also force authorities to act when human rights and civil liberties are threatened, especially when the international community gets involved.

Panelists noted that even during the 2022 elections, the government avoided public debate almost completely. Quality information is not enough to prevent abuses and violations of the law during elections in Serbia. The goal of the government in election campaigns is to ensure victory, which is largely achieved through disinformation campaigns. According to Professor Isakov, "Election debates were organized on public service TV, where opposition candidates were hindered while speaking with the goal of belittling and discrediting opposition representatives with personal attacks, including lies, shouting and disrespecting open dialogue in the studio."

Quality information is not enough to prevent abuses and violations of the law during elections in Serbia.

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