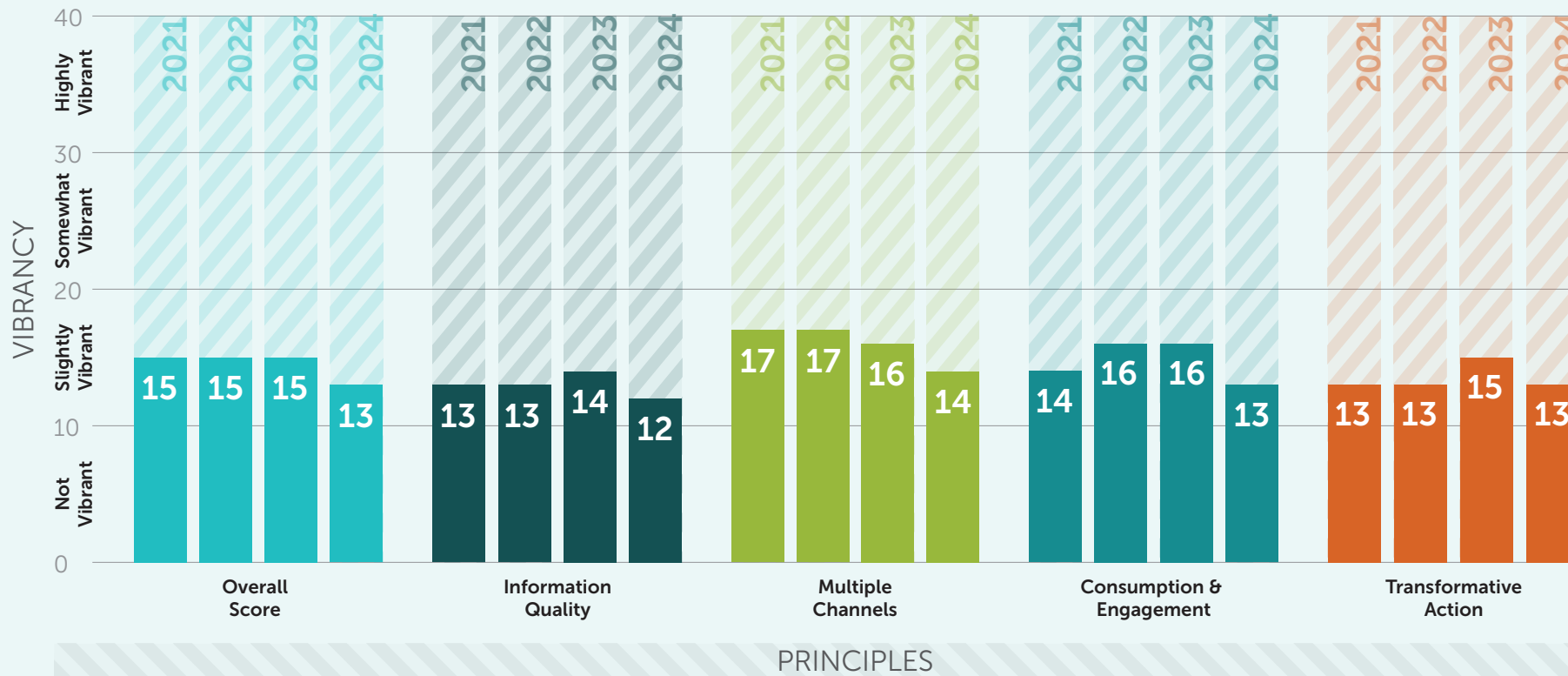


# SERBIA

# Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 4





**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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

13

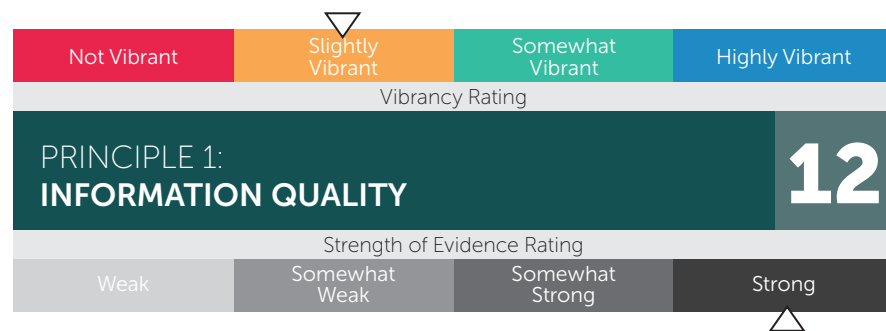
In 2023, the persistent disregard for the rule of law remained the biggest obstacle for Serbian democracy. Serbia dropped to the 104<sup>th</sup> position on Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, marking its lowest placement in the last 11 years, while public debt reached €35.5 billion (\$38.8 billion) in 2023, doubling since 2012. In May 2023, two tragic mass shootings deeply shook the country causing a public outcry. The year’s end was marked by the fourth extraordinary parliamentary elections since 2012, involving a highly manipulative campaign and innovative “vote-stealing” tactics as outlined in the Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability’s (CRTA) 2023 elections observation report.

Serbia fell 12 places to 98 out of 180 countries, on Reporters without Borders World Index of Media Freedom, representing the biggest drop among EU and Balkan countries. According to Freedom House’s 2023 report, Serbia’s deterioration in political rights and civil liberties stands as the worst of all European countries.

VIBE panelists gave Serbia an overall country score of 13 in 2023. This all-time low result stems from the uneven division of the Serbian media into two starkly different groups. The first is a small number of professionals that includes CSO investigative centers and dozens of local media that courageously and accurately report on issues in their regions. The second is most media affiliated with the ruling party (Serbian Progressive Party) and current government; this group dominates through sheer numbers and reach, especially via tabloid media, and

routinely seizes the spotlight by broadcasting political slander. The unique situation in Serbia sees leading politicians, including the president and prime minister, attempting to undermine serious journalism.

All four principles received low scores, ranging between 12 and 14, and all of these were lower than the 2023 VIBE study. Principle 1, which looks at information quality, got the lowest average score; this consistency shows the panelists’ near-identical perception of media sector realities. For Principle 2 (Multiple Channels of Information), scores ranged from a high of 20 for the indicator on access to information to a low of 9 for the indicator on the independence of information. In Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement), the indicator on media literacy remained the lowest scored of the principle. Principle 4 (Transformative Action) scores on the government’s use of quality information in decision making and information supporting good governance and democratic rights were the lowest scored indicators of this principle. The indicator on civil society use of quality information was the most highly scored of this year’s VIBE Serbia assessment, reflecting civil society’s role in enabling people to act together and exert greater influence on decisions, activities, and public policies.



The rare dissemination of quality information in the country continues to be eclipsed by the abundance of non-fact-based information circulated by numerous authority-controlled media outlets. Many of the dominant media outlets are turning into “low-quality information factories” with large media houses churning out over 300 stories per day. While Serbia has professional media that strive to publish quality news coverage, government-aligned media spread false claims and publish stories favorable to the government. Panelists strongly agreed on this point.

Indicator 5 tied for this principle’s lowest score of 8, as panelists saw a lack of sufficient levels of financing to support content production as the main obstacle for professional media producing quality news and information. Indicator 3 (information is not intended to harm) also received a score of 8, reflecting the rampant hate speech, anti-Western rhetoric, pejorative language that has infected Serbia’s information sphere. Svetlana Kojanović, director, Center for Monitoring & Activism (CEMA) in Čačak, highlighted that Serbia has been undergoing media reforms for nearly two decades and noted that “the more we fight for the public interest the less quality information reaches the public. The more we point out the need for citizens to be the center of attention, the more we see information on executive power figures.”

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

Adequate infrastructure exists, as do state and private faculties for journalism and content production professions. Numerous informal trainings covering a large range of media topics are organized by journalists’ associations, civil society organizations (CSOs), and international donors on a regular basis. However, training for editors at all levels is lacking.

A number of courses geared towards journalists were organized during 2023: health organizations trained journalists on how to manage information regarding health topics; International Journalists’ Association of Serbia (IJAS) cooperated with the US Embassy to organize training sessions for journalists on “storytelling on social networks”; an online training focused on investigative journalism techniques was organized by the Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia (CINS) and Transparency Serbia; the nonprofit Crime and Corruption Reporting Network, KRIK, offered a free workshop on investigative journalism on social networks; and CINS organized investigative journalism training, along with many others.

Everything is polarized in the Serbian media landscape: information, readers, reach and impact. In the minority is the group of professional media, investigative centers and press agencies that respect the journalistic code and produce quality information. However, quality news content reaches a limited number of citizens: For example, no more than 350,000 Serbian TV viewers have access to professional content as it is only disseminated by a single cable provider. Higher quality content is also sometimes published in a few of the low-circulation dailies and magazines and on social networks. In contrast, the majority of Serbia’s media sector consists of tabloid-type media which mainly broadcast entertainment and informative programs promoting the government. This content is broadcast on all TV stations with national coverage and by more than a thousand local television and internet-based media.

This media dominance allowed the president of Serbia to appear on national television, 248 times—equivalent for more than 10 hours

of airtime--from December 1, 2022 to October 15, 2023. This is [14 times the airtime](#) given to the opposition in the same period. Tamara Skrozza-- deputy editor-in-chief of FoNet news agency and a member of the Complaints Commission at the Press Council in Belgrade--described how the government often fabricates events to hinder journalists from covering more important topics, noting that due to time constraints “[journalists are]...allowed to pop out two or three times a week to attend controlled events or constant appearances made by political figures such as the president, prime minister, and opposition representatives.”

### **Indicator 2: The norm for information is that it is based on facts.**

While the Serbian media landscape does have fact-based, well-sourced objective information, sensationalism, the Serbian “Black Chronicles”—or crime-reporting—and reality programs dominate, as media outlets vie for increased clicks and audiences. Moreover, the bulk of manipulated information is disseminated via tabloid newspapers and two tabloid TV stations which are aligned with the authorities. As reported by [Raskrikavanje](#), 2023 saw 1,174 manipulative headlines on the front pages of six daily newspapers (*Informer*, *Srpski Telegraf*, *Alo*, *Vecernje Novosti*, *Kurir*, and *Politika*), most often in the form of unfounded or biased claims and manipulated facts.

Manipulated information is also spread via social networks. During the 2023 parliamentary campaign and as [published](#) by the Association of Serbian Media (ASMEDI), over 160 manipulative articles were recorded as appearing on the front pages of the nine most widely read editions of the daily press. The same or similar manipulated information was published by the media in their online editions, which is compounded by the lack of effective professional sanctions for unprofessional work. “Manipulation and tendentious reporting are more than simple disinformation,” Kojanović explained, “In Serbia, it is a coordinated pattern of behavior in all regime media, which aims to distort social reality and mislead the majority of citizens.”

NGOs conduct specialized research, and the results and facts are available to citizens and the media. Investigative CSOs are also devoted to their job and succeed in disseminating their research and monitoring results. Several websites check the truthfulness of statements and published data: Fake News Tracker, Unmasking, Truth-teller, and CRTA, among others. Some local media are also investing ways to identify and address fake news in their areas. Social media that have mechanisms for moderating content and reducing manipulated information are very rare; efforts to reduce manipulated information and misleading content are mainly undertaken by the online editions of a few professional media outlets.

### **Indicator 3: The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm.**

Serbian media continue to grapple with the East-West dichotomy, as media coverage persistently reinforce divisions. Anti-Western rhetoric has permeated public discourse and continues to rise throughout the country’s media sector. Russia has dominated media coverage, with more than [16,000 mentions in the last 12 months](#). The most influential television channels—RTS1, TV Pink, TV Prva, and Happy TV--had the largest share of pro-Russian and anti-Western media reports. Moreover, Russian media outlets are active in Serbia: Radio Sputnik has been broadcasting in Serbia since 2015, and its programming is aired by numerous local radio stations. In 2023, the Russia Today (RT) office in Belgrade launched an [online news service](#) in the Serbian language. The EU has called upon Serbia to comply with the Council of Europe’s decision to suspend the broadcasting activities of RT Balkan and Sputnik; however, the Serbian government took no action.

Hate speech is common in most print media, along with their corresponding online editions, with the use of derogatory names for members of certain nationalities and pejorative labeling of political opponents, critics from civil society, and journalists. Two of the television stations that broadcast nationwide (Happy and Pink) were the most egregious in their calls for violence, normalizing hate speech, giving war criminals space to address the public, and supporting ultra-

right organizations in their programs. They operate without suffering any ramifications. Tabloid media content is synchronized with the media campaigns of government representatives, frequently using the same rhetoric and repeating entire phrases.

In terms of regulation and self-regulation mechanisms, the Press Council is gradually expanding its influence. The Ministry of Information and Telecommunication, which is responsible for media and information, and the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) are the two institutions which have the capacity to influence the Serbian media sector; however, they are completely dysfunctional, allowing chaos to reign. Tabloid editors and journalists do not respect professional and ethical standards. In a six-month period, from July 1, 2023, until the end of the year, the Press Council noted that the Code of Journalists of Serbia was violated [5,551 times](#), primarily by tabloid media. The most frequent violations included truthfulness of reporting and respect for privacy.

Unprofessional journalism was observed after two mass shootings in May, one involving a 13-year-old student at a Belgrade elementary school and the second involving a 21-year-old man in the villages around the town of Mladenovac, one of 17 municipalities within Belgrade. The victim's families were further traumatized by numerous speculation and manipulated information throughout the entire media sector, which was compounded by clumsy decisions made by the competent authorities. Provisions in the Code of Serbian Journalists — prohibiting journalists from publishing disturbing content and instilling fear — were frequently violated. The media inflated the number of victims, published the identity of a suspected minor student, circulated unverified information and alleged statements from the suspect, and interviewed school students (minors) with inappropriate questions while disclosing their personal data.

“While the Serbian media landscape does have fact-based, well-sourced objective information, sensationalism, the Serbian “Black Chronicles”—or crime-reporting—and reality programs dominate, as media outlets vie for increased clicks and audiences.”

In addition to providing details about the suspect, the head of the police department in Belgrade showed the media a list of children the suspect allegedly planned to kill. These children received death threats weeks later. The president of Serbia spoke at length about the event, disclosing sensitive information about the young perpetrator, his parents, and his sister (also a minor). He presented details from the suspect's medical record. Several laws prohibit this; however, REM did not react. “The way these tragedies were reported is an anthology of disgrace and shame in our media community,” Skrozza stated. The media covered the second shooting, carried out by a 21-year-old the next day, in two villages near Mladenovac equally poorly.

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

In both the pre-election and election periods of 2023, most Serbian were not exposed to diverse and comprehensive content. The citizens get information mostly through television, and all of the six stations with a national frequency (four private and two public service) are biased. The delegation of observers of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) stated that the pre-election campaign was marked by “an unprecedented level of negative campaigning and fearmongering, attacks against the opposition and journalists, and serious issues regarding the media.” It was also [reported](#) that the delegation was disturbed by the president of Serbia's media dominance during the campaign, the level of inflammatory rhetoric used including by high-ranking officials, and the hate speech. Also, brought under scrutiny was the negative tone and pressure used against members of the opposition, journalists, and civil society activists.

The Vojvodina province is legally required to broadcast content in the minority languages, as is the public RTV service and minority media supported by the National Councils of National Communities. However, the experiences and viewpoints of different racial, ethnic, and religious affiliations are still not sufficiently reported and therefore fail to reach the rest of the population. Information about minorities is lacking in the majority language, leading to widespread prejudices throughout Serbia's citizenry. In February, the trilingual research portal, Transparent Vojvodina (Átlátszó Vajdaság), was launched in Subotica. "All pro-government tabloids and commercial televisions address exclusively the majority community, the Serbs of the Orthodox faith," explained, Siniša Isakov, professor of media technology, University of Novi Sad, "The presence of other communities is marginalized in their programs."

The findings of the Diversity Reporting Network indicate that the LGBTQ+ community is one of the three groups most often exposed to hate speech. The media often contribute to this, instead of educating and informing citizens which would help reduce stigma and prejudice. This is why the IJAS has [prepared guidelines](#) that can contribute to better reporting on topics important to the LGBTQ+ community.

Progress is expected regarding increasing accessibility for people with disabilities following the adoption of the new media law, which stipulates that the public broadcaster should adapt its content and that it should include sign language, audio description, and open and closed captioning in its programs.

Despite journalism being a predominantly female profession in Serbia, women continue to be underrepresented or portrayed in discriminatory ways. Female journalists in Serbia are subjected to sexism and misogyny, but they seldom talk publicly about this. There is marked gender inequality in the media sector throughout Serbia. While there are women in leadership positions in media outlets such as Nova Ekonomija, Glas Šumadije, and InMedia, they are the exception, rather than the rule. The management board of public service broadcaster Radio Television Serbia (RTS) only has one woman, and out of the nine members of Radio Television Vojvodine's (RTV) management board, only three are women.

### Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

There are [2,518 media in Serbia](#)<sup>1</sup> - 1,024 websites, 827 printed publications, 313 radio stations, 219 television stations, and 145 other outlets, that share a total income of €453 million (\$495 million) per year.

According to research conducted by Ipsos and IREX<sup>2</sup>, digital advertising in Serbia, is at the lowest level in Europe, despite experiencing growth. The [16 largest media companies](#) dominate the media market as they collect 75 percent of current advertising revenue and 88 percent of the media industry profit.

Since 2015, another significant funding source for the Serbian media has been project financing by local governments. Despite the initial intent of providing support for quality public interest media content, this project financing tool has evolved into funding media merely to ensure survival. As a result, the media experience political influence in their content, undermining the original intent of the local government financing instrument. Kojanović noted that, in the city of Čačak, "about 70 percent of the media budget for project financing is received by four media outlets. It's surprising that a significant portion of the local budget even goes to regime tabloids with national coverage located in the capital city."

At the end of 2023, the government of Serbia decided that both public service media, RTS and RTV, would be partly financed by the 2024 state budget, in addition to the mandatory tax paid by households.

Several media houses generate additional revenue by undertaking ancillary activities such as producing multimedia content for clients, renting out space, and opening coffee shops. Some of them have been successful, and this added financial stability has enabled these outlets to publish or air quality media content rather than "competing for clicks." This is the case for panelist Milorad Tadić, owner and editor-in-

1 The Agency for Economic Registers announced in December that almost a fifth of the registered media outlets (482) did not have all the information prescribed for registry by the new Law on Public Information and Media.

2 IREX implements the USAID-funded *Mediji.Inovacije* project in Serbia.

chief of BOOM 93 radio, who reflected on his 31 years of experience in the industry, highlighting the challenges in audience engagement in Serbia: “Cooperation with the positive aspect of the non-governmental sector [specifically the CSOs which operate completely independently of government influence and which cooperate with media on large investigations financed by international donors] is the only thing that can save professional media from ruin. The audience in Serbia has no money to finance the media.”

Mistrust in media, excessive advertisements, clickbait content, and “copy-paste” journalism, all explain why Serbian citizens are reluctant to pay for online media content. They are also dissuaded by misleading and manipulative information, political influence on media reporting, and insufficient quality and originality of media content. There is little awareness that media content should be paid for, apart from buying newspapers. While crowdfunding has been tried by some media outlets in Serbia, panelists were skeptical of it being a significant source of income. In Serbia, no daily news online media currently charges for access to its digital content. Only four percent of respondents to research conducted in 2023 by the Center for Media Professionalization and Media Literacy (CEPROM) have [paid for online articles](#). Due to its investigative activities, KRIK brings in 15 percent of its annual budget from individual donors, mostly from the Serbian diaspora residing abroad.

Governmental subsidies often distort the media market. The government’s favorite media often receives tax exemptions and similar [market distortion privileges](#).

While international donor financing of media projects is mainly apolitical, most of the media they support are local with fewer employees. They have to perform basic media functions and undertake compliance with extensive bureaucratic donor requirements, which limits basic activities and renders this funding source problematic for

professional media. Stojan Marković, editor-in-chief of *Čačanske Novine* newspaper and online portal, criticized the bureaucratic reporting requirements that prevents donors from focusing their attention on the quality and impact of the content they are financing and explained, “Days and hours are wasted on detailed bookkeeping and donor reporting, [along with] financial records to the detriment of journalistic work. It must be clear that small media do not have the opportunity to [dedicate] a special person to be a project manager, but larger publications do. After the project is finished, most of the work involves reporting to donors instead of devoting time to quality marketing to reach the largest possible audience with their content.”

The Journalists’ Association of Serbia’s (JAS) research on labor rights revealed that every second journalist or media worker does not have a permanent employment contract. Their labor rights are mostly threatened by the absence of compensation for overtime work, lack

of respect for working hours, dismissals, and political pressure. The collective contract, designed to protect the rights of employees, is only followed by four media outlets.<sup>3</sup>

Western companies collect 63 percent of the advertising revenue from advertisements they run in Serbia.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, there is limited interest for major advertisers to advertise in local media. The selectivity in advertising of state companies and institutions is evident. Last year,

more than €800,000 (\$874,000) were allocated from public budgets to advertise with companies that publish the newspapers *Informer*, *Srpski telegraf*, *Alo*, *Večernje novosti* and *Kurir*. These publications collectively [featured almost 1,200 articles](#) containing manipulative information on the front pages. This funding from public budgets was channeled

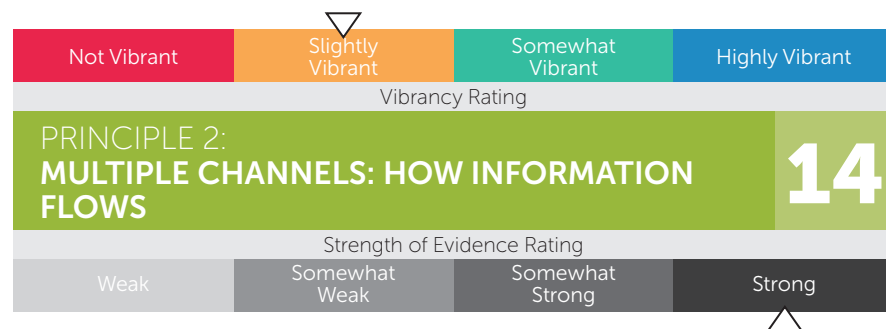
**“Hate speech is common in most print media, along with their corresponding online editions, with the use of derogatory names for members of certain nationalities and pejorative labeling of political opponents, critics from civil society, and journalists.”**

3 Radio Television of Serbia, Radio Television of Vojvodina, Radio Television of Kragujevac and Magyar So.

4 Deutsche Welle Srbija, Mar 15, 2023



through various advertising contracts with state institutions, public companies, and local governments. It is significant that the public broadcaster, RTS, one of the biggest advertisers<sup>5</sup>, is primarily advertised in pro-regime tabloids. This [underscores](#) the extent to which the advertising market is being controlled.



Panelists had differing opinions on the score given to the legal framework for media, as it is rarely equitably enforced. In practice, the flow of information is severely limited by government-led policies that undermine every voice of truth concerning social and political dynamics. These numerous attacks are a formidable obstacle to free information flow in Serbia. Panelists gave the two indicators examining people's rights to create, share and consume information, and the independence of information channels with their lowest scores.

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

Panelists argued that appropriate laws to protect freedom of speech exist; however, since the laws are not applied, they are largely ineffective. Serbia's legal framework has been harmonized to meet international standards, but the government simply refuses to implement it. For years, political actors and officials from ruling parties and institutions have refused to appear on two TV stations, Nova S and N1, violating Serbians' constitutional right to information as well as the Law on Access to Information of Public Importance.

<sup>5</sup> Under Serbian law, the country's public broadcaster can sell advertising, while also receiving funding from the state budget.

Government officials' attitudes towards professional journalists drastically worsened in the second half of 2023. Prime Minister Ana Brnabić publicly condemned professional media, describing them as "tycoon media that are killing their country." Other statements from the government falsely attempted to link journalists to criminal activities and fascism. At an [extraordinary press conference](#), the prime minister acknowledged she had withheld information from professional media. The president, who divides the media into two groups, does the same. The first group consists of professional media, which he actively avoids. The second larger group is primarily comprised of national television outlets which serve as a platform for publicity. His appearances typically involve monologues, without political opponents, experts or activists invited to join him in the studio. The regulator consistently fails to respond to cases of media which are unlawfully shut out by government officials.

In July, IJAS and BIRN published the report, *Safety of Journalists in the Digital Environment*. In the comments sections on websites and social network profiles, newsrooms and journalists are exposed to threats as well as organized and synchronized bot attacks. The report also states that there is no adequate response to this type of attack and underlines that jeopardizing journalists' safety potentially leads to their self-censorship. The Bureau for Social Research in Belgrade (BIRODI) analyzed the activities of bots created illegally by the government and sent their findings to the prosecutor's office. The response received was that it "was not within their jurisdiction."

There were numerous forms of harassment towards journalists and newsrooms in 2023. Journalists were even attacked by police officers while reporting on citizen demonstrations. Two years after the court decision, the city administration of Vranje has not yet demolished the illegal casino building that walled up the office windows of OK Radio. The bishop and spokesman of the Serbian Orthodox Church accused individuals and groups of "sowing extreme intolerance towards the church, as demonstrated by the CNN affiliate group of digital and print media.

Threats have even forced journalists to flee their homes and several have

been relocated, some outside the country. A video was published by Pink TV calling for the arrest of journalists and editors of the daily newspaper *Danas*, the portal Nova.rs, and TV stations Nova S and N1. Numerous other threats and attacks were [registered all over country](#). The Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office also published official data showing that 73 cases were registered concerning threats to journalists from January 1 to November 30, 2023.

Faced with the authorities' unsatisfactory reaction to the attacks, media associations organized some self-defense tactics. The Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV) appointed commissioners in 11 cities of Serbia to register cases of attacks and discrimination against journalists. IJAS has launched a [platform for the safety of journalists](#) "at the front line" which includes resources and tools to support journalists who fall victim to online violence. In March, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) expressed concern regarding attacks on journalists in Serbia, and the Assembly of the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) endorsed the plea of the Serbian journalist associations and unions, calling for an end to impunity for crimes against journalists and the targeting of media workers in Serbia.

Among 35 European countries, Serbia ranked eighth highest for the number of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) registered, according to the [August 2023 report](#) supported by the Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE) and prepared by The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation. The CASE report states that 28 SLAPPs were registered in Serbia and that the number is increasing. Vesna Radojević, manager of KRIK's Raskrinkavanje (Disclosure) project, stated, "KRIK received 14 lawsuits in 2023, and this trend is now impacting all investigative media, as well as the non-investigative media who refuse to be regime apologists."

In Serbia, there have been no documented instances of repressive demands by the police or the prosecutor's office to reveal journalistic sources.

At the end of December 2023, around a hundred lawsuits were lodged

by victims' families against media outlets that published information that the head of the Belgrade Police Department showed on [television](#)-including the list of children's names that the alleged Belgrade school shooter planned to target--instead of pursuing cases against the police for disclosing this information during a live press conference. By the end of 2023, these lawsuits remained active.

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

Serbia's communications infrastructure is relatively good, and the country has widespread coverage. According to the government's [Bureau of Statistics](#), about 85 percent of the population used the internet, while almost nine percent have never used the internet. In the panel's opinion, media polarization is also reflected in the choice between the two main providers of ICT services: Telekom Srbija, which is owned by the government, is aggressively trying to lure SBB (United Media, United Group) users to reduce the influence of the independent channels that only SBB offers.

In Serbia's public service media, programs adapted to people with disabilities are very rare; on commercial television, there are even fewer. Commercial broadcasters mostly adhere to the recommendations regarding these programs only during election campaigns. REM published the last monitoring report on the matter in 2019.

Mainstream media provide inaccurate reporting, young women are not represented, nor are members of the LGBTQ+ community or the Roma community. According to [NNS' monitoring](#) of the pre-election campaign, no marginalized group was mentioned.

According to a [December 2023 SHARE Foundation](#) report, about 40 percent of internet users in Serbia are not ready to give up anonymity for security reasons. Citizens are aware of the risks, but they also resist control and monitoring measures.

The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Communications and Postal

Services (RATEL) still does not analyze market share, and it can only be assessed based on the number of connections, without the financial indicators of content distribution. In the fourth quarter of 2023, RATEL [reported](#) that the market share according to the number of subscribers was: 60 percent for Telekom Srbija, 28 percent for SBB, and 4 percent for the other four providers. Isakov explained that the two leading operators, Telekom Srbija and SBB, have been at war for years and “the regulators side with the state-controlled company and remain silent while local governments prevent the construction, expansion, and improvement of the SBB infrastructure. This has been going on for more than ten years. This bias towards Telekom has led to a sharp increase in the number of its users.”

Technology-based violence is a growing issue. Violence against women is a long-standing issue in Serbia, and modern technology appears to worsen the situation. Reports covering violence against women are rarely analytical, and tabloids appear to adhere prioritizing the perpetrator’s back stories and engage in victim blaming. The biggest problem is with the media revealing the identity of the victim and her family members, directly or indirectly. Non-progressive media cite that they are presenting “the other side of the story,” when they are really giving space to politicians or war criminals and others who show hatred, contempt, and support violence against women.

In the period from July to October 2023, the SHARE Foundation [reported](#) that a total of 25 cases regarding the violation of digital rights were recorded in Serbia. In July, a list of almost 15,000 bots — the names and profiles of people accused of belonging to a troll farm controlled by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party — were published on X (formerly known as Twitter). Although it was not clear where the list came from or whether all the names on it had been verified, it resulted in numerous anonymous attacks on the individuals listed.

“ There were numerous forms of harassment towards journalists and newsrooms in 2023. Journalists were even attacked by police officers while reporting on citizen demonstrations.

### Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

A lot of information is unavailable to the public. The latest example is the case of the UAE airline company, Etihad, which in 2023 quit the co-ownership of a Serbian airline with no information made public. “Trust in institutions has completely eroded,” Kojanović explained, “and simultaneously, we are flooded with information from various sources, many of which do not undergo any kind of filtering.” Ana Lalić Hegediš, Novi Sad-based NDNV executive director, described how a lawsuit was filed against her for ‘violating the honor and the reputation of the Clinical Center’ in Belgrade after she published an article about the center’s investments according to data downloaded from the government’s public procurement portal. “The trial is still ongoing,” Lalić Hegediš

stated, “This is another bizarre lawsuit when you keep in mind that all I did was use official publicly released information.”

From February 17, 2022, to July 31, 2023, 788 state bodies and organizations, public companies, and authority institutions, [did not publish requested information](#) even after a ruling made by the Commissioner

for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection. The Commission is very slow in resolving media complaints and institutions rarely respect its decisions. As a result, it is not a reliable partner for journalists. The panel unanimously felt that the likelihood of obtaining information from some state institutions reduced significantly in 2023.

Some of the courts, such as the High Court in Belgrade, send important announcements and trial schedules to their mailing list; the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade has adopted the approach of sending important announcements via a Viber group that includes journalists. Journalists can track the progress of court cases on the [portal of the Serbian judiciary](#).

Confidential information is occasionally published. Contrary to popular belief that these are isolated incidents or individual cases of data

leakage, the panel agreed that such breaches of confidentiality stem from an organized infrastructure involving a data transfer chain to certain media based on vested interests.

The panelists felt that executive authorities, courts, and prosecutor's offices have spokespeople and offices who often refuse to answer the questions posed by media representatives. The real spokesperson for these authorities is President Vucic who broadcasts messages to the public on an almost daily basis.

#### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

Although there are no formal obstacles to establish media, concentration within the sector establishes a political and economic monopoly that significantly impacts the dissemination of ideas, information, and opinions in the media space across the whole of Serbia. At the local level, a few individual owners control multiple TV stations and other local media. Radojević noted, "There are a number of portals that serve to permanently attack the opposition, and the owners are hidden in Switzerland." Gavrilović described the controversial nature of media ownership stating, "Two out of four stations with national frequencies are owned by an individual closely associated with a member of the ruling party's main board. Formally, it would appear that ownership diversity exists, but their [editorial] policies create the impression of a unified newsroom".

A new law openly adopts a revisionist approach by reinstating state ownership of the media, contradicting European standards. This law enables state-owned Telekom, to become the central hub for the future state media and propaganda machine, as it now will be allowed to establish specialized and informative channels.

After several years' delay, REM announced a tender at the end of 2022 for the award of the fifth license for terrestrial television broadcasting at the

national level. However, after a year, REM has not announced a decision. Moreover, there is room for more channels in the terrestrial multiplex, but no progress has been made when it comes to granting additional licenses.

**“ Serbia’s chaotic media environment is characterized by a plethora of minimal regulatory interventions, while media organizations are influenced by various factors including ownership dynamics, funding sources, and a lack of competitive market forces.**

According to the results of a research survey conducted by BIRODI in 2022, *Public Opinion of Serbia and the Media*, 64 percent of respondents noted that RTS was their main source of information. Prva and Pink television followed with 33 percent. Professional television outlets N1 and TV Nova S were the main source of information for 13 and eight percent of respondents, respectively. The main daily news program, Dnevnik RTS, has an estimated audience of 3 million citizens. Monitoring of the central

news broadcasts shows that both public services do not pay attention to subjects unrelated to the ruling power. [Research](#) conducted by Novi Sad School of Journalism concludes that television stations Pink, Hepi, Prva, and B92 present an idealized picture of reality, promoting daily public appearances of the ruling elite along with continuous criticism of the opposition and their activities.

#### **Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

Serbia's chaotic media environment is characterized by a plethora of minimal regulatory interventions, while media organizations are influenced by various factors including ownership dynamics, funding sources, and a lack of competitive market forces. Government subsidies are often manipulated, advertising funds remain largely controlled and inaccessible for most media, donor funds are limited and difficult for some media outlets to manage, while regulators and public services are under political control. The result is that the editorial content in the Serbian media is heavily influenced.

Only a few professional content producers, affiliates of foreign media companies, can afford clear division of labor and separate the newsroom

from business operations. Small professional media often operate with few employees juggling multiple roles (journalist, editor, project manager or technical support) simultaneously.

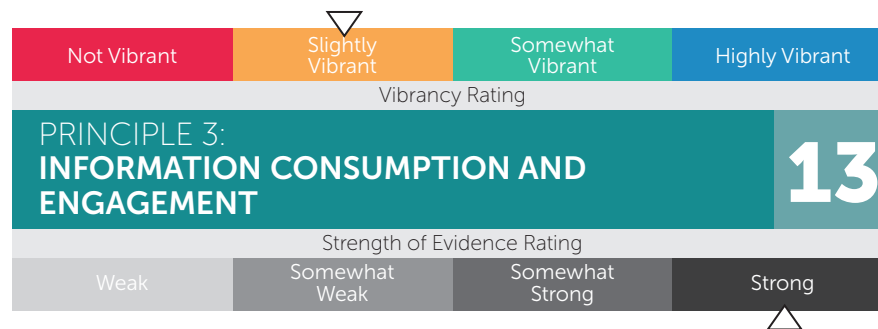
Public service media is funded through a combination of state budget allocations, revenue from advertising sales, and taxes paid by Serbian households. This situation distorts the advertising market as it enjoys a more stable source of funds than all other competitors. There was a positive development for public service broadcaster, RTV: 24 years after its studio was bombed, it has been moved to a new studio. However, the panel argued that political interference into the editorial content of two public service media outlets escalated in 2023, marked by the dissemination of biased programming, misreporting important public events (such as citizen demonstrations), and heavily biased coverage of the country’s top political figures and subjects.

Regulatory bodies tasked with overseeing frequency allocations, licenses, and telecommunications services fail to fulfill its functions in Serbia. REM operates entirely to support government-aligned media and the tabloid journalism it produces. It is committed to preserving the interests of the authorities, while conspicuously concealing results that are not favorable to the government. A symbolic action that reveals REM’s questionable ethics was carried out by the president of REM’s council, [who published a photo of herself wearing a Nazi uniform](#) on her Telegram channel. The Jewish municipality in Belgrade and the Coalition for Free Media expressed their outrage.

Because of a delay in finalizing the published bid, at least 10 regional television stations and 20 radio stations are broadcasting without permits. Failing to fulfill its obligation of convening sessions twice a month, the REM Council finally held its “regular” session on November 20, marking the first session in six months. On TV stations with a national frequency, [advertising blocks often last up to 16 minutes each](#), while the Advertising Act set a limit of 12 minutes per hour of programming. TV Pink, which renewed its national coverage broadcasting license for another eight years, has openly continued to violate professional and ethical standards, laws, and regulations.

REM’s [Report Assessing the Compliance with Legal and Programmatic Obligations by Commercial Media Service Providers for the period October 2022-March 2023](#) (provided at the request of the parliament following the mass murders) aimed to help identify the main TV outlets promoting violence. It states that Pink adheres to the law regarding electronic media, which is not supported by Pink’s tabloid news coverage.

After the parliamentary elections in December 2023, the president of the REM Council stated that monitoring commercial television coverage during the election campaign was not completed and thus results could not be published. However, IJAS revealed that on December 20, REM experts had completed this work for all television stations. The CINS obtained access to unpublished analyses, revealing that Pink Television, TV Hepi, and TV Prva all allocated a far larger proportion of its airtime to the ruling party’s “Aleksandar Vučić - Serbia Must Not Stop” ballot. In addition to the discrepancies in airtime, all above-mentioned TV stations consistently reported negatively about the opposition, while portraying the ruling party positively. “Both regulators REM and RATEL did not fulfill either of its two basic missions: they did not ensure fair market competition, nor did they protect communication and media service users,” Isakov highlighted.



Despite laws regarding data privacy and digital security existing, they are rarely applied, and information consumption and engagement remain biased along political lines—either pro-government or pro-opposition. Panelists gave this principle a low score of 13 due to numerous cases of compromised privacy, generally low media literacy, restricted access to

truthful political information, and almost total control over information disseminated by media in local areas. The indicator regarding media literacy received a low score since access to alternative sources of information and critical opinions is very limited. These factors contribute to a significant portion of the Serbian population still being influenced by propaganda, and progress to counter this influence is slow.

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

In 2023, the panel cited examples of violations of citizens' privacies, including disseminating the IDs of student protesters, monitoring activists via social media networks, illegally collecting data regarding activists' private lives, and manipulating or disseminating of false information to discredit them. The editor-in-chief of Pink TV aired deepfake videos of several opposition politicians, altering both the context and the words spoken by these individuals.

In 2023, there were [812 digital rights and online violations](#) in Serbia in the third quarter alone, of which 577 were fraud, threats, and manipulation. Out of these 577 violations, the media sector accounted for more than 50 percent of these cases (295). Tamara Filipovic Stevanovic, general secretary of IJAS in Belgrade, explained how the draft of an oppressive law which encroached upon the personal data of citizens and journalists, as well as digital security, was halted twice by citizen protests. She added that the draft still existed and a future attempt to reinstate it was highly likely.

There is no systematic training for digital security, but journalism associations organize and conduct sporadic trainings together with the civil sector. Some newsrooms are very digitally secure. Tadić explained, "Training and advice is available, as well as free tools that enable additional security on the internet; however, user knowledge is not at the desirable level."

In the third quarter of 2023, according to regular SHARE Foundation [monitoring](#) of cyber incidents, the most numerous were distributed

denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks on media sites, with certain media being repeatedly exposed to DDoS. There were multiple cases of professional media or investigative portals, such as *Južne Vesti*, *Demostat* and the *Insider*, suffering cyber-attacks.

Almost half of the recorded attacks on networks contained elements of digitally realized gender-based violence. Not only celebrities and politicians, but also ordinary girls and women who are not public figures have been targeted. Videos generated by artificial intelligence, or deepfake videos, which violate the physical identity of these female victims, are also published on social network accounts. Despite numerous reports, submitted to both the authorities, and network owners, [response remains inadequate](#).

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

In 2018, a course on language, media and culture was introduced as an optional subject in Serbia's school system, which included some elements of media literacy education. However, panelists felt this had been ineffective and agreed a better solution would be to incorporate media literacy in every school subject. Nevertheless, Tadić commended the Ministry of Education for including the language, media and culture course in elementary school curriculum as a step towards a more democratic society.

**Almost half of the recorded attacks on networks contained elements of digitally realized gender-based violence.**

According to [research](#) done by the Novi Sad School of Journalism (NNS), the language, media, and culture course is popular among high school students. However, an [analysis of the results](#) from this program shows that student presentations on the

school websites are full of incorrect information. Those interviewed for this survey emphasize the importance of NGO support in encouraging critical thinking among citizens. Almost all survey respondents point out these subjects must be introduced from pre-school, because children are largely exposed to the media from early childhood. Besides young people, parents need to be educated, as their [role in this process is](#)

[essential](#). Tadić also highlighted that the Serbian media needs to face the issue of how to reach 18–35-year-olds. Panelist Gavrilović added, “The media literacy of the elderly is important, because research has shown that they are an equally risky group when it comes to media manipulation.”

At the beginning of the year, the Ministry of Information publicly supported the implementation a project aimed at the development and improvement of media, digital, and information literacy in Serbia for 2022-2024. Funded by USAID, Propulsion, a leading supplier of engaged communications and social impact campaigns across Central and Eastern Europe, is leading this project in Belgrade, which includes support from the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CESID), the Digital Serbia Initiative (DSI), and the Beta News Agency from Belgrade. A national coalition of people dealing with media literacy was established in NNS.

The main challenge of media literacy projects is the [absence of long-term funding](#). This leads to the loss of connections with previously engaged target groups. In the 2022 annual [Media Literacy Index](#), Serbia was placed in the fifth cluster, which means that media literacy was very low. However, in 2023, with 33 points out of 100, Serbia was promoted to Cluster 4, ranking 31st place out of 41 European countries.

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

Political monitoring, surveys, and everyday experiences illustrate that citizens are passive and avoid constructive debates. The public is clearly divided and awareness of a need for dialogue has been lost. Deep divisions exacerbated by polarized media result in unequal access to information, while CSOs and journalistic associations engage in debate topics, but rarely with other political fronts.

**Deep divisions exacerbated by polarized media result in unequal access to information, while CSOs and journalistic associations engage in debate topics, but rarely with other political fronts.**

The social conditions and atmosphere, especially in small media outlets, is characterized by overtime, low wages, uneducated owners, weak editors, self-censorship, and the influence of politics and advertisers on editorial policy, constraining the journalists’ willingness to exercise their freedom of speech. Kojanović observed their fear of retaliation and explained, “This is why, for example, the journalists of three local TV stations in Čačak agree without question to have their programs

interrupted to broadcast the president of the State’s appearance on national TV. However, dialogue, debate, and public discussion are completely absent, both in the media and public sphere.”

A rare series of five debates between the authorities and media was organized by IJAS. The debates included editors, journalists, and judiciary representatives

from the Basic and Higher Public Prosecutor’s Offices in Niš, Novi Pazar, and Kragujevac. IJAS also organized two meetings in Belgrade with the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office. The topics of the meetings included the safety of journalists and the improvement of communication between journalists and the judiciary. Representatives of both professions highlighted problems in mutual communication, as well as the desire to improve communication and greater mutual trust.

According to the panel, discussions on social networks are often battlegrounds, fostering discord and hate. Comments on social networks and portals are often full of manipulative information, insults, inappropriate content, and hate speech. These comments are often fertile ground for the ‘internet bot’ activities of certain political actors. Panelists felt, however, that there have been occasional positive examples where such debates or upheavals on the internet prompt the authorities to react.

Platform moderators are rare and address complaints selectively.

### **Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.**

Most media engage with established topics that editors consider important. There are some media outlets that study their audiences via a detailed analysis of visits and 'feedback' from online platforms to plan and disseminate content.

"Radio Boom93 and several other media supported by IREX use analytical data and analytics in preparing content for their audience," said Tadić. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the presence of investigative and monitoring CSOs. This increase is a direct response to the professional media audience's desire for quality information. This expansion has led to improved quality and coverage of previously neglected topics and arguments, making them accessible to a wider audience.

There are some media shows and surveys to which viewer phone calls or tweets are allowed. Open conflicts unfold on social networks involving not only citizens, but also politicians and media actors. However, this expression of opinions and attitudes fails to contribute to constructive political discussions on the raised topics and does not fulfill the primary needs of the audience. Ljiljana Stojanović, editor-in-chief of JUGpress regional press agency in Leskovac, criticized the bots that often attack her media outlet, and stated, "If bots are suffocating you and making accusations about the content you publish, it is difficult to engage with a constructive audience."

Print circulation is dwindling, and its impact is declining. Public service media are failing to fulfill their legally prescribed role and mission, increasingly lacking the professional capacity to organize even the most basic debates in the studio with participants who hold divergent views from the regime's propaganda.

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

In Serbia, some panelists argued that civil society media often adopts

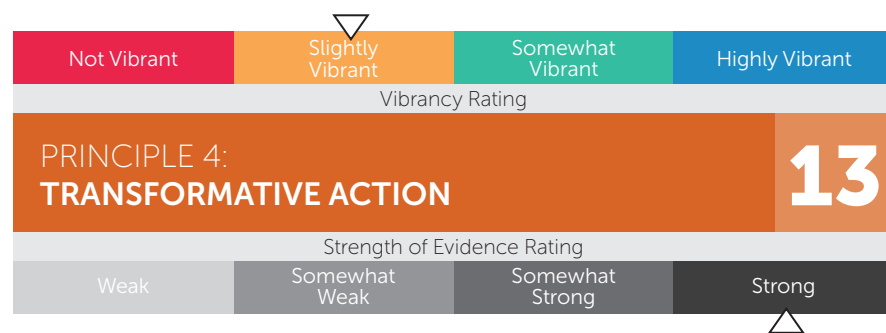
the functions of community media. There are differences in certain aspects, but civil society media tries to establish closer contact with citizens and address their interests via participatory journalism, in a similar way to community media. Kojanović confirms this idea and commends the excellent cooperation between NGO media and local independent media. "We even use mutual resources," she explained, "When we monitor public procurement with the support of local independent media, citizens become engaged. Through this synergy, we serve the public interest of the local community."

Marković disagreed, saying that community media does not exist in Serbia, as it is commonly understood in other parts of the world. He further explained, "I don't feel that my local media is community media, even though I try to work in the public interest. Perhaps it is only in Serbia that the NGO media "TV Forum" from Prijepolje could come under the definition of community media"<sup>6</sup>.

Civil society media is responsible for serving the community, involving its citizens and dealing with local issues. For example, in Novi Pazar, the media was seldom focused on women and, as a result, women rarely voiced their opinions publicly. The establishment of the "Free Media" portal brought about some positive changes. It is a media outlet that adheres to the Code of Journalists of Serbia and the jurisdiction of the Press Council, giving special attention to women. Stojanović noted that citizens recognize the local media's capacity to win battles against local authorities, meaning that the editorial offices are frequently flooded with objections and complaints. "JUGpress maintains its connection with its citizens via the *Readers' Report* column which effectively influences the local self-government and the mayor himself," she explained.

<sup>6</sup> TV Forum has been a trailblazer in since it began. It was the first television with an informative program in Prijepolje, the first civil sector TV station in the Balkans founded by women, the first local media in the Western Balkans to launch and successfully implement a donor campaign. Throughout the years, the station has been committed to objective, timely and truthful journalism despite enduring persistent pressures and attacks.





The overall rating for Principle 4 is low as two indicators received scores lower than ten. Indicator 20, which examines whether information supports good governance and democratic rights, received a low score for two reasons: 1. Limited use of accurate information and 2. Lack of democratic rights and efforts to promote them. Indicator 18 on civil society's use of information scored the highest of all 20 VIBE indicators since panelists perceive these organizations to uphold democracy within society.

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

Non-partisan sources of information are virtually non-existent. The rare examples include student media. The Department of Journalism in Niš has two — Studentski Daily (SDL) supported by the U.S. Embassy and No Limits (Bez Limita). Students studying journalism and communication studies write and edit texts for these two outlets on a voluntary basis. SDL's readership and recognition has continued to grow among Niš students over its 12 years. In the Belgrade Faculty of Political Science, the journalism department houses several student newspapers: *Politikolog*, *Žurnalist portal*, and *Slušaonica 6*. The faculty also has a television newsroom. Novi Sad has a students' media outlet called *Odjek*.

In keeping with global trends, the popularity of print media in Serbia continues to decline. Competition from online media and access to free information are the main challenges for printed publications.

Very few citizens seek information from multiple media sources and rarely from those with ideologies that differ from their own. The past decade has been marked by the absence of public dialogue, and the collapse of some of the rights and freedoms that were previously established. Bearing in mind that 2023 was an election year, this situation appears to be worse than ever before. As a rule, debates conducted on social media networks are unconstructive and heated; they often “cancel” individuals or target dissenters instead of encouraging participants to consider another viewpoint. Individuals on digital platforms are mostly looking for others to back their ideas.

As far as the government is concerned, panelists agreed that the government is primarily only interested in pursuing its own agenda, which is developed without public consultations; unquestioning approval is expected from everyone else, without debate. The government did not show any willingness to hold open forums, even after the May tragedies hit Serbian society hard.

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

Panelists expressed dismay over the media's manipulation of public opinion, highlighting its tendency to portray Serbia variously as a welfare state, an “economic tiger” experiencing rapid economic growth, and putting in place “the best projects in Serbian history,” whether talking about building roads, attracting foreign investment, or modernizing the army. Kojanović stated, “If this situation continues in the mainstream media, and obviously it will, we will end up with ‘zombified citizens’ living in a virtual world devoid of critical thinking.”

At the local level, panelists believed that it is not possible to encourage citizens to participate in constructive dialogues and make critical observations about Serbia's policies or economy, because the fear of retaliation is too strong. Only a small number of NGOs are left to defend civil liberties and fight for human rights. Some panelists felt that 2023 was extremely challenging considering the electoral process and the government's manipulation of the public.

Due to the proportional electoral system at all levels of government, citizens vote for a list bearing the name of the political party leader rather than individual deputies and councilors. This bypasses direct communication between citizens and their elected officials, leaving people without a specific elected representative to contact directly.

An example that illustrates the failure to use quality information in citizens' decision-making is the response to the COVID-19 vaccination during the global pandemic. Vaccination numbers in Serbia were low because of manipulated information and fake news that was disseminated. This skepticism about vaccines bled over into other areas: The level of distrust was so severe that whooping cough — a disease that was almost eradicated long ago — [returned in 2023](#).

Beside manipulative information regarding health issues, people are influenced by their daily exposure to an [enormous amount of manipulative information about politics](#).

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

In Serbia, CSOs represent the voice of the people and provide space for civic activism, enabling people to act together and exert greater influence on decisions, activities, and public policies. Led by the Center for Monitoring and Activism (CEMA), cooperative activities involving citizens, CSOs, and the media, has been monitoring public procurement in the city of Čačak and the region for several years. In a specific case of corrupt public procurement of city budget funding, CEMA identified several criminal acts, and this information was published in the local media. The local portal *Ozonpress.net* continued to investigate the case and discovered additional evidence to support CEMA's claims. The result of this collaborative effort was the withdrawal of the public bid.

At the local level, NGOs almost never receive funding for media projects of public importance, and the ones that do are almost always

a government-organized nongovernmental organization (GONGO). For example, in 2016 the Association of Media and Media Workers of Serbia (UMMRS) was established and is [widely seen as a GONGO](#) created to serve the ruling regime in Serbia to support its media policies in Serbia. This association also serves as logistical support for regime-affiliated media when they engage in media project financing bids at the local, provincial, and state level. It nominates eligible members to the commissions responsible for evaluating submitted projects on behalf of the authorities.

The frequency of severe attacks against activists, including environmental activists and others, escalated in 2023. Throughout the election campaign, they were exposed to threats from paid bots.

Before the elections, more than 100 operators called citizens every day and asked them to vote for the ruling party candidates from a large call center in an undisclosed location. [Money](#) was paid to participating activists in the headquarters of the GONGO, called the Center for Education and Development of the Youth of Belgrade (CEROB), to initiate these calls to voters. Tadić noted, "Numerous GONGOs abuse, destabilize, and undermine freedom of speech, freedom of organization, and activism."

There are investigative organizations in Serbia that carry out essential analyses of budget spending, corruption, and public opinions. Following the May tragedies and several months of citizen protests in support of the parents of the murdered children, CSOs publicly presented numerous initiatives aimed at implementing a wide range of measures to restore safety in schools and society. However, these initiatives were largely ignored.

**Very few citizens seek information from multiple media sources and rarely from those with ideologies that differ from their own.**

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

Rather than relying on high-quality information and verified facts in making policy decisions, the panel felt that the Serbian government

relies on selective information that depicts itself in a positive light, making it difficult for the country's citizens, media, and civil society to hold it accountable. A prime example of this is the lack of understanding among Serbians about government spending: In a 2023 survey by the Regional Information Agency [JUGpress](#) in the Jablinica and Pčinj districts, 43 percent of respondents indicated that their knowledge of budget spending is at the lowest level. Additionally, the government has used quality information to achieve propagandistic goals: As described in [Le Monde Diplomatique](#), “. . . the average net earnings expressed in euros for the first 11 months of 2023 increased compared to the same average from 2022 by 15%. . . In reality, real wage growth for 11 months is 2%. [The Bureau of] Statistics regularly publishes data on real wage growth, but the government regularly and conscientiously keeps this data silent.”

Given this current state of affairs, the ruling party has latitude to adopt laws and policies that are not in line with the public interest. For example, [in 2023](#) the Coalition for Media Freedom expressed concerns that the latest versions of the draft Law on Public Information and Media and the Law on Electronic Media deviated significantly from the 2020 Media Strategy, which reflected key agreements between the Association of Media and Journalists and the Serbian government. As a result, it is possible for the government to continue financing media that often violate the Code of Journalists of Serbia, promote violence, and use hate speech targeting those who disagree with the authorities.

The panel believed that increasingly professional media are not invited to events organized by government representatives or the president. This exclusion is not limited to Serbian media; in 2023, it was expanded to include respected global media and researchers, including international observers of the elections.

Political discourse and public debates are not based on productive arguments, facts, and constructive dialogue, especially in parliament. Rather, discussion and debate turn to attacking political opponents,

the media, and NGOs. There are numerous examples that illustrate how manipulated information strongly impacts political discourse, particularly after manipulated information is published in the tabloids; the same words are echoed in the Serbian parliament, the national press, and electronic media. In one notable example in 2023, local media reported that someone had vandalized the Church of Saint Sava in Kragujevac with graffiti in the Albanian language. This incident was eventually identified as [fake news](#).

One tragic incident, in the town of Bačka Palanka, was described by panelist Isakov as a “paradigm of inaction” as it is a perfect illustration of the authorities’ failure to act. A 13-year-old boy died after he was electrocuted by a loose power cable hanging from an electricity pole, 12 days after a severe storm; this happened just a few days after the boy’s grandfather was killed at the same location trying to remove the dangerous cable. After grandfather’s death, local citizens had reported the danger, but the relevant services failed to address the danger. Following the two tragic deaths, the local authorities continued to hide those responsible for the oversight, while criticizing the citizens who protested and the media that reported on the tragedies.

When government actors do cite facts, they often use partial statistical data as evidence and rarely present issues in the appropriate context. Most of their decisions are not based on facts and explained using demagogic language.

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.**

The efforts of NGOs and media to combat corruption, both locally and nationally are stifled by the authorities. Nevertheless, the government has been unable to suppress ongoing discussions about corruption, thanks largely to investigative organizations, CSOs, and professional media. Tadić explained that the Government of Serbia mostly ignores media investigations that reveal corruption, abuses, and violations of

the law, and instead invests all its efforts into refuting such claims and discrediting the media in question.

In 2023, there was a noticeable decline in the performance of the so-called independent state institutions, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and the Commissioner for Protection of Equality. As highlighted by Tadić, the Anti-corruption Agency, the prosecution, nor other institutions responsible for anti-corruption are effectively functioning. Their lack of response to situations and events within their scope is apparent.

On the day of the multiple murders at the school, on evening prime-time television, the president announced 10 measures for the prevention of future tragic events. These measures were supported by the government, with the prime minister stating that the government would be “strengthening sanctions for media service providers that promote and endorse violence.” However, the government has taken no further action on the safeguards put forward by the president, as summarized by Isakov: “Of the 10 proposed measures, most were either implemented sloppily or not at all.”

The obligation of state and local authorities to ensure their work is accessible to the public and to provide information regarding their activities is poorly respected. For months, the authorities ignored the demands of civil protestors to address violence in society and rebuild trust in institutions after the May tragedies, opting instead to wait for the protests to subside on their own. The authorities are far more responsive to violations of rights and freedoms if the information is supported by the international community.

During the campaign for the 2023 elections, the government avoided holding public debates to prevent citizens from hearing different views. Media coverage of the elections was either negatively biased or, for some media, completely ignored and neglected. The [number of videos of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party](#) was far greater than the sum of all the opposition’s, and the video campaign was mostly disseminated via the internet. The president of Serbia was at the helm of the entire campaign— for parliamentary, provincial, and local elections in 66 cities

and municipalities. Stojanović commented, “This election campaign—in which the president unscrupulously leads his party’s campaign in the parliament elections, abusing his office and public media resources—is a catastrophic paradigm.”

On Election Day, thanks to the efforts of TV N1 journalists, blatant election fraud was broadcast live on-air. Buses from Bosnia and Herzegovina were [captured on camera](#) transporting voters to Belgrade whose identity cards listed addresses such as Belgrade electricity substations, abandoned shacks, waterworks, hospitals, and other non-residential locations. As outlined in a [CRTA election observation report](#), these extra voters were intended to save the ruling party from defeat in the capital, as confirmed by this CRTA report.

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This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.