



## **RESILIENCE:**

For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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# **THE SERBIAN MEDIA SYSTEM MARKED BY A MEDIA THAT SYSTEMATICALLY SPREADS DISINFORMATION, HATE SPEECH AND PROPAGANDA**

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**SERBIA**

## RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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### SERBIA

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a country where attempts to establish a regulated media system, including improvements of legislative and systemic measures, have been going on for decades, Serbia shows numerous signs of poor media regulation, and non-compliance with media laws (clearly evident through abuses of systems co-financing media projects), as well as the inefficiency of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM). In such a system, public communication is not based on facts, there is neither transparency nor accountability, and society is enclosed in a vicious circle of disinformation, propaganda and narratives that spread hate speech. International reports, as well as internal monitoring of media work done by various journalists' associations, researchers, and civil society organizations, indicate that media practice is often the reverse of laws and good practices, for "media dependence on centres of power, pressures, and poor economic status of journalists result in the spread of self-censorship, tabloidization and the decline of ethical standards that can be singled out as the basic characteristics of the media scene in Serbia" (Jaraković, V. 2019:6).

Public communication is not based on facts, there is neither transparency nor accountability, and society is enclosed in a vicious circle of disinformation, propaganda and narratives that spread hate speech

This research tried to establish how the financial and economic structure of the media market in Serbia affects the decline in the level of professional standards, the collapse of media autonomy and the misuse of disinformation and hate speech for propaganda purposes. For the purposes of the research, various sources were consulted—media research published in previous years, analytical articles of investigative journalists, web portals that deconstruct disinformation and manipulative presentation of information to the public, and decisions and monitoring of regulatory bodies, as well as interviews with one media researcher and one Press Council representative.

The following chapters will present the general framework of media dependence on centres of power, as well as the consequences of such dependence that can be seen in the content that these media place. After that, the different groups of media that can be described as creators and transmitters of information that can be characterized as hate speech,

disinformation and propaganda will be presented by chapters. The most influential and most widely circulated media in Serbia were taken into account, and groups were formed according to the frequency of non-professional reporting. Each chapter indicates the connection of the ownership structure of the media with different centres of power for the presented group of media. After the conclusion, recommendations were formulated for achieving greater transparency of the financial and economic structure of the media and for raising the level of the quality of content, based on the most frequently expressed requests of media professionals.

## 2. MEDIA DEPENDENCE ON CENTRES OF POWER

The media in Serbia show an extremely low degree of autonomy when it comes to economic and financial sustainability. The analysis published by IREX in 2018 showed the worst results for Serbia since 2000. The score for sustainability at that time was 1.64 on a scale from 1 to 4:

*“Private, as well as public media, are neither able to function as efficient and well-run companies nor do they make money. Due to the unregulated market, they do not use business planning or international accounting and financial standards. More than 2,000 media outlets are registered in the country, and therefore sustainability for one average media outlet is not possible”* (IREX, 2018:9).

At the same time, the website of the Media Ownership Monitor in Serbia indicates that media outlets that have an audience share of over 50% are owned or controlled by a political party, politician or political group, or have an owner with political affiliations.<sup>1</sup>

If the government and individuals close to the government are strongly influenced, it is difficult to expect that the work of the media will be independent and that journalism will be autonomous and critically oriented. Thus, the results of the research of the Novi Sad School of Journalism on the diversity of publicly funded projects in Novi Sad, Kikinda and Subotica show “that most money is directed to those contents that carry a high risk of passivation of the media, that is, to their transformation into bulletins of activities of local self-government, and thus of the ruling parties” (Janjić, S. et al. 2018:6).

The systematic financing of the media from the centres of power directly connected with the governing structure inevitably leads to a media system in which many media are imbued with an uncritical attitude towards the government’s actions.

One of the causes of the non-functionality of the project co-financing system introduced at the state and local community level, which should support media projects of public interest, is the way of selecting members of the competition commission, which is marked by numerous abuses:

*“The ten most frequently appointed members decided in almost every third competition; Every tenth member of the commission was appointed contrary to the Law; Certain members decided in each of the project cycles; The European Commission, even after three years of implementation, points out in its reports the problem of the political influence of the administration on the allocation of subsidies for co-financing media content, especially at the local level”* (Strahinić, J. 2019:11).

Thus, the systematic financing of the media from the centres of power directly connected with the governing structure inevitably leads to a media system in which many media are imbued with an uncritical attitude towards

<sup>1</sup> Media Ownership Monitor in Serbia. Available at: <http://serbia.mom-rsf.org/rs/nalazi/indikatori/#1895a26c9d314c00bdf16f9afd8ebe78b> (accessed on: 28 May 2020)

the government's actions. This leads to the transformation of the media into the propaganda machinery of the governing structure, which is contrary to the Law on Public Information and Media and the ethical norms of the journalistic profession.

## 2.1. Content placed by the media with direct or indirect government support

It is precisely the wide range of narratives characterized by hate speech, disinformation and propaganda that the media scene in Serbia carries, as one of its most significant characteristics. The fact that this is a significant phenomenon that indicates the existence of a high concentration of several media actors who systematically publish such content is proven by the research of the Raskrikavanje portal, which established that the tabloids *Informer*, *Srpski telegraf* and *Alo* published over 700 fake news stories on their front pages in 2018,<sup>2</sup> while the same tabloids, along with the tabloid *Kurir*, published 945 fake and unfounded claims on their front pages in 2019.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, these tabloids are among the highest-circulating newspapers in Serbia—100,239 copies of *Informer* and 41,223 copies of *Kurir* are sold daily.<sup>4</sup> If we keep in mind that these tabloids also have their highly visited online editions<sup>5</sup>, it becomes clear that their reach is significant. At the same time, this way of work of tabloids reflects the dysfunction and inefficiency of the regulatory framework of the media system, given the fact that although sanctions for such work exist, they are not a corrective factor that would make it possible to stop the spread of false news in a systematic way. Attorney Vladimir Gajić commented for *Danas* newspaper on the inefficiency of court measures and suggested how this problem could be overcome: “If the tabloids had to pay a great sum of money for the way they defame and slander people, they would think twice before deciding to do so. However, the courts award fees of 1,000–2,000 euros, which is the amount that a tabloid earns in just a few hours of selling newspapers. The court could, therefore, stand in the way of the tabloids”.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the statements of high-ranking state officials rarely criticize the unprofessional work of the media, in which disinformation, labelling and hate speech are often used as a way to deal with political dissidents (see below), yet such practices are characterized as pluralism of opinion and a

2 Đorđević, J. and Radojević, V. (2019). *More than 700 lies on the front pages of three tabloids in 2018* (online). *Raskrikavanje*. Available at: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Vise-od-700-lazi-na-naslovnim-stranama-tri-tabloida-u-2018-godini-346> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

3 Vučić, M. and Radojević, V. (2020). *At least 945 fake news stories on the front pages of four tabloids in 2019*. (online). *Raskrikavanje*. Available at: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Najmanje-945-laznih-vesti-na-naslovnicama-cetiri-tabloida-u-2019-557> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

4 OVERVIEW: SERBIA (unpublished research)

5 *kurir.rs* is visited by an average of 971,538 people daily, *alo.rs* by 497,085, while *Informer.rs* is visited by 249,448 people (Gemius audience, 2020). Available at: <https://rating.gemius.com/rs/tree/32> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

6 Živanović, K: (2020). *The courts are pandering to the tabloids*. (online). *Danas*. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/sudovi-podilaze-tabloidima/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

reflection of media freedoms. One of the examples of such attitudes is the statement of Prime Minister Ana Brnabić: “There is freedom of the media, the media here can express their views, criticize the government, the president, and they usually do so. There are media in Serbia that believe the Government is doing its job well and those who think the opposite. But all of them have a place to say that publicly and, as in other European countries, not be sanctioned”<sup>7</sup>. The Prime Minister’s statement is the attitude that can most often be heard from government representatives when it comes to media freedom in Serbia. The fact that there are media in which criticism of the government can be heard does not deny the numerous abuses of the media for propaganda purposes, which the public warns about<sup>8</sup>.

Given the great role of the state in financing media that do not have the capacity to ensure financial sustainability in the market, an important contribution to the sustainability of professional media would be high quality in the work of state-funded media, which would mean working in accordance with the law and public interest. Thus, the Rulebook on co-financing projects for the realization of public interest in the field of public information stipulates that when selecting projects, it must especially be assessed “whether the bidder has been imposed measures by state, regulatory or self-regulatory bodies in the last year, due to violations of professional and ethical standards” (Official Gazette of RS, No. 16/2016 and 8/2017, paragraph 4, Article 18). However, on the contrary, the analyses of researchers show that the media that receive the most money from the state budget are exactly the media that are characterized by unprofessional work, spreading disinformation, panic and propaganda.

The self-regulatory body Press Council, which monitors the work of print and online media, points to violations of the Code of Journalists of Serbia, publishes public warnings to media that violate the Code, and also conducts regular monitoring of the number of violations committed by print and online media. The monitoring results from the second half of 2019 indicate that the media that received significant financial assistance from the state are precisely the media that most often violated the Code of Journalists of Serbia. The following table shows the media that took the first four places in terms of the number of violations of the Code in that period.

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7 *Nezavisni.rs* (2019). Brnabić: The government does not influence the editorial policy of any media. (online). Available at: <https://nezavisni.rs/2019/03/29/brnabic-vlast-ne-utice-na-uredjivacku-politiku-nijednog-medija/> (accessed on: 28 May 2020)

8 In March 2020, Academic Action sent a request to REM to dismiss members of the RTS Board of Directors and to ban the broadcasting of news and political programmes on the Pink, Happy and Studio B television channels due to “non-compliance with the laws regulating the media space and misuse of the media for the purpose of a deceptive cover-up of scandals of members of the ruling party and propagandistic glorification of its president” (Cenzolovka. 2020: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/akademska-akcija-od-rem-trazi-zabranu-emitovanja-pinka-hepija-i-studija-b/>, accessed on 3 June 2020)



## NUMBER OF ARTICLES IN THE FOUR TABLOIDS IN WHICH THE CODE WAS VIOLATED

Table 1

MEDIA	NUMBER OF ARTICLES IN WHICH THE CODE WAS VIOLATED (July-December 2019)
ALO	214
KURIR	163
SRPSKI TELEGRAF	137
INFORMER	103

Source: Press Council, available at: [http://www.savetzastampu.rs/cirilica/uploaded/szs\\_monitoring\\_jul-dec\\_2019\\_V1.pdf](http://www.savetzastampu.rs/cirilica/uploaded/szs_monitoring_jul-dec_2019_V1.pdf)

The web portal Raskrikavanje collected data on state co-financing of media for the period 2017, 2018 and the first three months of 2019, and compared these data with the number of cases of disinformation and manipulation published by these media in the given period. The following table shows the data for the four media which, in the given period, spread the most false and manipulative news.

## FUNDS FROM THE BUDGET AND THE NUMBER OF PUBLISHED FAKE NEWS STORIES IN FOUR TABLOIDS FOR THE PERIOD 2017, 2018 AND THE FIRST THREE MONTHS OF 2019

Table 2

MEDIA	BUDGET-ALLOCATED FUNDS	NUMBER OF PUBLISHED FAKE NEWS
INFORMER	RSD 14,800,000 (EUR 123,000)	82
ALO	RSD 11,400,000 (EUR 95,000)	72
SRPSKI TELEGRAF	RSD 17,207,000 (EUR 143,000)	63
KURIR	RSD 850,000 (EUR 7,000)	47

Source: Raskrikavanje, available at: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/kesformisanje/>

Almost without exception, the media that receive the most support from the state publish the most propaganda content, and are not critical of government decisions, while often labelling political dissidents, and spreading disinformation and hate speech.

Having conducted the research “Communicative Aggression in Serbia 2019”, Marko Nedeljković, researcher and director of the Center for Media Professionalization and Media Literacy, points to a significant phenomenon that turned out to be a media practice in Serbia in the context of labelling and spreading hate speech:

The media that receive the most support from the state publish the most propaganda content, and are not critical of government decisions, while often labelling political dissidents, and spreading disinformation and hate speech.

*“The results show that every day the media in Serbia publish about 80 articles in which they directly declare individuals or groups as ‘traitors’, ‘foreign mercenaries’, ‘Ustashas’, or ‘Shiptars’. This means that on an annual level, we come to a figure of at least 30,000 citizens who will be labelled in one of the above ways. If we add to that the already common terms used today for dissidents, such as ‘thief’ and again popular terms such as ‘terrorist’ and ‘fascist’, the number becomes even more alarming because we come to a figure of at least 50,000 citizens. I especially highlight these expressions as they belong to the domain of the most extreme ones, especially those using the terms ‘Ustasha’ (508 articles per month) and ‘Shiptar’ (491 articles per month) which also contain elements of hate speech and as such, should not even be used in the media, and yet you can see from the results that the use thereof is not an exception, but a rule applied daily” (Nedeljković, M, interview).*

In addition to labelling, hate speech, and discrediting political dissidents, a significant feature of the tabloid media is the use of extremist narratives in the form of announcements of war with a neighbouring country, World War III, or a war of great powers.<sup>9</sup>

It follows that the state not only does not use the legal and regulatory framework to sanction media that spread propaganda, disinformation and hate speech but rewards such media by continuously supporting their work through competitions for co-financing media projects that should pursue the public interest. It can be concluded that the work of such media, the production and spreading of such content is de facto part of the media policy of the state or government structures. Given the impact of such media content on citizens, the question arises as to whose interest it is in to expose citizens to media that spread hate speech, propaganda and disinformation and how can we ensure that freedom of speech, which government institutions claim exists, is not equated with hate speech, false information and propaganda.

On the media scene in Serbia, there is a conflict between two paradigms—‘ideal’ and ‘power’. Namely, it is indisputable that there are laws that regulate the work of the media in a good way, yet at the same time, there are media that violate the laws without consequences, which clearly indicates that the paradigm of power is stronger than the “ideal” found in the laws.

## 2.2. Non-traditional media as an appropriate ground for the spread of extremist narratives

During the research of the Liber New Media Center on the experience of Serbian citizens with hate speech in public discourse, most respondents said that hate speech is most commonly found on Facebook (607 answers or 74% of respondents), while the next place in terms of frequency of hate speech or verbal abuse was the section where citizens leave comments on media

<sup>9</sup> Fakenews tragač (2019). War is the cheapest word of Serbian tabloids. (online). Available at: <https://fakenews.rs/2019/03/11/rat-je-najjeftinija-rec-srpskih-tabloida/> (accessed on: 28 May 2020)

posts (397 answers, i.e. 485 respondents), followed by Twitter (279 answers – 34% of respondents), then articles and television shows in the media (228 answers – 28% of respondents), and blog comments (209 or 26%) (Kišjuhas, 2016:15).

A significant example of the spread of hate speech and false news in the online sphere in Serbia is the Facebook group “STOP naseljavanju migranta” (STOP Migrant Settlement)<sup>10</sup> with over 330,000 members. The group publishes content on government decisions and incidents related to migrants and refugees, presenting them as a threat, often using unverified or false information, images with inappropriate descriptions and similar content. This content has the function of intimidating citizens and creating an atmosphere of intolerance, which is evident from the comments that citizens leave below the posts in that group, which are often explicit hate speech directed towards refugees and migrants, as well as towards local politicians.

The Internet has enabled various groups with extreme views to reach directly to citizens, to communicate with them and spread their ideas more efficiently and massively than before.

The Internet has enabled various groups with extreme views to reach directly to citizens, to communicate with them and spread their ideas more efficiently and massively than before. “Researchers agree that organizations with extreme attitudes use internet communication to effectively create and strengthen a collective identity. Internet communication gives them the ability to do so in a cheaply and anonymously” (Nikolić, 2018:163). Although these groups rarely get space in traditional media, their representation on social networks and internet platforms, as well as the number of people they manage to reach, point to the need to create an appropriate regulatory framework for the placement of media content in this way, as well as the deconstruction of the narratives that are placed through these channels.

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<sup>10</sup> Available at: [https://www.facebook.com/groups/512775282720731/?ref=group\\_header](https://www.facebook.com/groups/512775282720731/?ref=group_header) (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

### 3. SYSTEMATIC PRODUCTION OF DISINFORMATION, HATE SPEECH AND PROPAGANDA

The latest Reporters Without Borders report indicates that it is often dangerous to be a journalist in Serbia and that fake news is gaining more and more visibility and popularity, so Serbia has dropped three more places on the media freedom list and is now ranked 93rd.<sup>11</sup> The poor situation in the media in Serbia was also documented by the Government of the Republic of Serbia in the latest media strategy for the period 2020–2025, in which, in the section Review and analysis of the current situation, the following is established:

*“The role of the government includes a large number of goals that can be concluded to be largely unfulfilled. This applies in particular to: creating a favourable environment for the development of freedom of expression, given the large number of threats, intimidation and attacks on journalists, inadequate protection of information sources, poor socio-economic position of journalists and media workers, insufficient openness of institutional sources of information, discrimination of certain editors and journalists by public authorities, violation of legal obligations and human rights in the media content of certain media (endangering the privacy of people who are the subjects of the writings, the so-called discrediting of campaigns, endangering personal dignity, hate speech, fake news, non-compliance with special rights of children and minors and victims of violence, leaks from investigations, media promotion of convicts, promotion of problematic lifestyles, etc.)”.*<sup>12</sup>

The latest Reporters Without Borders report indicates that it is often dangerous to be a journalist in Serbia and that fake news is gaining more and more visibility and popularity.

The research portal Fakenews tragač performed a statistical analysis of the connection between the sources of disinformation, as well as a catalogue of the media that have published the largest number of cases disinformation in the previous two years. The leaders of the practice of spreading disinformation are the tabloids Alo, Kurir and Informer.<sup>13</sup>

Research conducted in previous years, analytical and research articles, complaints, lawsuits and decisions of regulatory bodies, provided an insight into the existence of several different media groups, which systematically place disinformation, hate speech and propaganda, as well as the existence of several different objects that such narratives target. Although there are still media in Serbia that have maintained a high professional standard, the simultaneous existence of numerous and influential media that systematically

<sup>11</sup> Reporters without borders. (2020). Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/serbia> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

<sup>12</sup> Strategy of the public information system in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2020–2025. Available at: [https://www.media.srbija.gov.rs/medsrp/dokumenti/medijska\\_strategija210\\_cyr.pdf](https://www.media.srbija.gov.rs/medsrp/dokumenti/medijska_strategija210_cyr.pdf) (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

<sup>13</sup> A complete list of media and a graphical representation of their connections are available on the Fakenews tragač website. Fakenews tragač. (2020). Hubs and network manipulation (online). Available at: <https://fakenews.rs/2020/03/31/habovi-i-mreze-manipulacija/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

produce content full of hate speech, fake news and propaganda contributes to Serbia being a documented country in which such a model has become an important element of the media system.

### 3.1. Tabloids as the most active generators of disinformation, hate speech and propaganda

In Serbia, in addition to the usual columns characteristic of this type of media (reporting on the lives of celebrities in a sensationalist way), tabloids focus on political topics and thus significantly influence public opinion. In an interview for N1 television, Vesna Radojević, an investigative journalist from the Raskrikavanje portal, pointed out this problem:

*“The topics of our tabloids are focused on local and foreign policy, which is unbelievable. Tabloids all over the world deal with the private lives of public figures, and these are not topics of public interest. In our country, the situation has completely changed, for the focus of the tabloids is politics. Therefore, fake news is a government project because they support the government and deal with destroying political enemies.”<sup>14</sup>*

Many analyses and research studies have been conducted on the role of the tabloids in Serbia, as a means of discrediting and fighting political dissidents. It turned out that the newspapers that violate the Code of Journalists of Serbia the most are also the media that most often confront opposition leaders. Among the mentioned media, Informer stands out as the media that most often and most openly attacks the opposition. According to Kvartalni medijametar, in the last three months of 2019, most of the articles in Informer belonged to a topic marked as political life in Serbia, and among the published articles, as many as 95% had a negative value context in relation to this topic (Jarić and Laban, 2019:60). In comparison, the percentage for the same parameter in Kurir is 77% (Ibid: 61) (with twice as many articles as Informer), and for Alo 18% (Ibid:55). On the front pages of these papers, among the most frequent words is the last name of opposition leader Dragan Đilas, as well as its variation Đilas's; In addition, the words “Boško” and “Ćosić” are used in Informer, which refer to the other opposition leader, Boško Obradović, and the programme director of N1 television, Jugoslav Ćosić, which is considered to be the media outlet that criticizes the current regime the most. Kurir uses “Lutovac” and “Democrat” the most, referring to the current leader of the party that was previously in power (Ibid:34-35).

It turned out that the newspapers that violate the Code of Journalists of Serbia the most are also the media that most often confront opposition leaders.

In the discursive analysis, the authors of the mentioned research identify Informer as a leader among daily newspapers in “creating a negative image of the current opposition” (Stanković, 2019:136). Patterns in reporting on

<sup>14</sup> N1 (2020). Radojević: Prime Minister Brnabić especially picks on N1 TV journalists. (online). Available at: [rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a565246/Radojevic-Premijerka-Brnabic-ima-poseban-pik-na-novinare-televizije-N1.html](https://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a565246/Radojevic-Premijerka-Brnabic-ima-poseban-pik-na-novinare-televizije-N1.html) (accessed on: 28 June 2020)

political dissidents can be noticed both in regular articles and columns of Informer editor-in-chief Dragan Vučićević. They include but are not limited to: strictly personalized criticism of opposition leaders, questioning the moral credibility and political capacity of the opposition, highlighting its lack of patriotism which is reflected in loyalty to Western powers, and presenting the moves of the opposition as an attempt to overthrow the ruling system with the aim of coming to power for personal gain (Ibid). Hate speech and disinformation, in addition to dissidents and critics of the ruling structures, are also aimed at vulnerable social groups (national minorities, women<sup>15</sup>, migrants), as well as at people from neighbouring countries.

*"In recent years, we have witnessed a sudden rise in explicit hate speech against national minorities and neighbouring nations on the front pages of tabloids. Informer's labelling practice, according to which the good one is declared a Serb (Trump, you Serb! Putin, you Serb!), and the one who is not good is declared a Shiptar (Trump is a Shiptar?!) is the lowest form of public communication"* (Jovović et Al., 2018:30).

The media in Serbia will declare someone Shiptar 491 times a month (Nedeljković, M, interview), which indicates the frequent practice of labelling and creating negative narratives about Albanians. As the journalists of the Fakenews tragač portal found, narrative matrices with negative-value connotations, disinformation and open hate speech towards Albanians range from declaring Albanians "criminals and haters of Serbs", labelling them as ungrateful and abusing hospitality in Serbia, to proving by alleged DNA analysis that they are actually Serbs<sup>16</sup>.

Along with Albanians, Croats are the most frequent targets of hate speech in the domestic media. The term "Ustasha" appears in 508 media articles per month (Nedeljković, M, interview), while the tabloid Informer, more precisely its editor, offered non-existent evidence that at least 90% of Croats are Ustashas (Đorđević, J. 2019).<sup>17</sup> Apart from the constant identification of the neighbouring people with the fascist movement, the constant militarization of neighbourly relations is also noticeable. Croatia is presented in the tabloids as a country that constantly poses the danger of a new war

<sup>15</sup> Female politicians and journalists are frequent targets of attacks by tabloids and their editors. In response to this practice, the group of Journalists Against Violence issued a statement stating, among other things, the following: "For years, the owner and editor of the tabloid "Informer" has been posting sexist insults in his media and on his Twitter profile, aimed at female journalists whose reporting he does not like. The latest in a series of his targets is N1 journalist Žaklina Tatalović, whose photos he frequently publishes insulting her physical appearance, and he also recently "renewed" the practice of attacking journalist Tamara Skrozza. Vučićević's pattern of insulting women is always the same: focused on the physical appearance or sex life of his targets" (N1 Belgrade, 2020). *Novinarke protiv nasilja: Država da zaštiti novinarke izložene provokacijama* (online). Available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a593114/Novinarke-protiv-nasilja-Drzava-da-zastiti-novinarke-izlozene-provokacijama.html> (accessed on: 28 June 2020)

<sup>16</sup> Mihajlović, D. (2019). From "Little Schengen" to big stereotypes: The image of Albanians in the media. (online) Fakenews tragač. Available at: <https://fakenews.rs/2019/11/27/mali-sengen/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

<sup>17</sup> Đorđević, J. (2019). How Informer's mathematics "proves" that almost all Croats are Ustashas. (online). Raskrikavanje. Available at: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Kako-Informerova-matematika-dokazuje-da-su-skoro-svi-Hrvati-ustase-373> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

(Marković, T. 2018)<sup>18</sup>, (Janjić, S. and Šovanec, S, 2018:54), and the tabloids further dramatize the situation with false claims such as “Serbs in Croatia hunt like wild beasts” (Vučić, M. 2019).<sup>19</sup>

The tabloid media in Serbia also use disinformation when reporting on women. Such an example is the sensationalist reporting on the murder of the singer Jelena Marjanović. For more than four years (since April 2016), tabloids have been spreading inaccurate information while reporting on this murder. Some of them have published more than 200 articles about this case, with numerous instances of disinformation (Maksimović, S, 2019).

### 3.2. Propaganda, hate speech and disinformation as characteristics of commercial television channels

Television is an essential source of information for the citizens of Serbia. Serbia tops the list of European countries in terms of the period during which its citizens watch television (on average 5 hours and 32 minutes daily), according to the 2019 report of the European Broadcasting Union<sup>20</sup>. That is why it is important to point out the continuous and systematic practice of certain television channels in the production of propaganda content, which often consists of open hate speech, spin and disinformation, most often to discredit opposition movements, parties and politicians, as well as defending the current government. In the show Tačka 2, Insider’s research team describes the media lynching matrix, claiming that it is more dangerous than any censorship.

It is important to point out the continuous and systematic practice of certain television channels in the production of propaganda content.

*“It all starts with the tabloids first publishing information that is often inaccurate or only partially accurate – about individuals or groups. Such placed information is taken over, as true, by commercial televisions with a national frequency, and often by local ones. Then there are all-day tv specials. The image of the targeted individual is being presented all day. Many analysts in television studios comment on such information, and the most dangerous thing of all is that representatives of state institutions, i.e. the authorities, take part in the lynching with their comments.”* (Insajder, 2020).<sup>21</sup>

According to the five-month monitoring of the Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI), from September 2019 to January 2020, Pink TV was the leader

18 Marković, T. (2018). *The media keep Serbia in a state of combat readiness.* (online). Al Jazeera. Available at: <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/mediji-drze-srbiju-u-stanju-borbene-gotovosti> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

19 Vučić, M. (2019). *In half a year, more than 400 lies on the front pages of four tabloids.* (online). Raskrikavanje. Available at: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Za-pola-godine-vise-od-400-lazi-na-naslovnicama-cetiri-tabloida-488> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

20 Bojković, B. (2019). *The Internet is advancing, but television is still being watched* (online). RTS. Available at: <https://www.rts.rs/page/magazine/sr/story/411/film-i-tv/3612995/internet-napreduje-ali-televizija-se-i-dalje-gleda.html> (accessed on: 28 June 2020)

21 Insajder (2020) Available at: [https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/18855/TA%C4%8CKA-2-Mediji-kao-mehanizam-uz-pomo%C4%87-kojeg-se-lak%C5%A1e-vlada-\(EMISIJA\).htm](https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/18855/TA%C4%8CKA-2-Mediji-kao-mehanizam-uz-pomo%C4%87-kojeg-se-lak%C5%A1e-vlada-(EMISIJA).htm) (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

in the negative representation of the opposition party and their boycott of the elections, as well as of their leaders. Those parties were negatively portrayed 90% and their leaders 97% of the time on this television channel (BIRODI, 2020:6). The situation was no different in the period before the election campaign: monitoring of the main news on television channels with national coverage conducted by the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) shows that among the five most represented politicians, the only representative of the opposition, Dragan Đilas, is also the only primarily negatively portrayed actor, with his most negative portrayal being once again on Pink TV (CRTA, 2020:12). Quantitative-qualitative analysis of the main news programme of this television channel conducted by the Novi Sad School of Journalism shows an “extremely high” percentage of journalistic bias towards the topic and the subject, reflected in the fact that Pink journalists and editors did not sanction or leave out “statements with offensive elements against opposition representatives” (Valić Nedeljković and Isakov, 2020:24). As an example of Pink’s journalistic bias, there is an article that begins with the words: “On another fabrication of the Alliance for Serbia” (Ibid:25), with a similar tone being highlighted in the analysis of this television channel’s morning show, in which the host Predrag Sarapa uses the phrases “Đilas’ madness” and “empty dreams of the opposition” (Ibid:80-81). In addition, Pink is characterized by open letters from the channel’s owner, Željko Mitrović, intended for his political dissidents, which are read in their entirety in the main news programmes by the newscaster. In these letters, Mitrović uses “extremely inappropriate language and insults against the person he is talking about” (Ibid:17).

For the Belgrade local elections of 2018, according to the monitoring of Transparency Serbia, in support of the electoral list around the SNS, as well as in the feature stories that speak negatively about the opposition, Pink and local Studio B were in the lead (Transparency Serbia, 2018). However, this television channel came into the spotlight in December of the same year, when its reporter Barbara Životić, in her live coverage of the civil protests “Stop the Bloody Shirts”, labelled Dragan Đilas as the organizer of the protest and described the protest slogan as astounding hypocrisy as the protest organizers call for “lynching, rape, violence, coup” (zivstepa, 2018). Numerous reactions and condemnations of relevant persons and associations followed. However, the fact that this is not an isolated case is supported by a similar example from this year (2020), when the newscaster of Studio B’s news programme stated that “The alliance led by the media tycoon and kleptomaniac Đilas, the bully and fascist Obradović and the international fraud Jeremić today showed all its misery and sleaziness, as well as there being no limit for them in their desire to humiliate and harm Serbia and the Serbian people” (Direktno, 2020:p.5).

Another example of the use of hate speech to defend the governing structure, which was not prosecuted or sanctioned despite the report, is the ethnic profiling and discrediting of Professor Sinani of the University of Belgrade on the basis of his ethnicity, in the morning show of commercial television



Happy. The host insultingly pointed out the professor's nationality for the purpose of defending the Minister of Finance Siniša Mali, whose doctorate was being investigated at that time due to suspicion that it was plagiarism<sup>22</sup>, which has been proven in the meantime. After that, the criminal charges against Milomir Marić, the editor of Happy TV, were filed by the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation and media associations; however, the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office rejected the criminal charges<sup>23</sup>.

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22 "Marić stated in the programme that Hashim Thaci and Ramush Haradinaj would decide on the doctorate, explaining that "one of their representatives is a member of that commission", alluding to Sinani. "He cannot be a moral judge. How do we know what Thaci and Haradinaj told him?" (...) The media also reported that Marić had highlighted Sinani's "suspicious surname" and said that he could not be a moral judge, because in Kosovo, "Thaci and Haradinaj would shoot a Serb who would try to do so." (Insajder (2020). REM initiated proceedings against TV Happy for insulting Professor Sinani; Prosecutor's Office: We will act within our authority (online). Available at: <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/15709/REM-pokrenuo-postupak-protiv-TV-Hepi-zbog-vre%C4%91anja-profesora-Sinanija-Tu%C5%BEila%C5%A1tvo-Delova%C4%87emo-u-okviru-ovla%C5%A1%C4%87enja.htm> (accessed on: 28 June 2020)

23 Kolundžija, D. (2020) The Third Basic Prosecutor's Office also rejected the criminal charges against Milomir Marić. (online) Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation. Available at: <https://www.slavkocuruvijafondacija.rs/truce-osnovno-tuzilastvo-odbacilo-krivicnu-prijavu-protiv-milomira-marica/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

## 4. OWNERSHIP AND FINANCIAL SOURCES OF MEDIA THAT SYSTEMATICALLY SPREAD HATE SPEECH, DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

Observed narratives that spread hate speech, propaganda and disinformation indicate the primary mission of tabloids and pro-regime television in Serbia—to favour or defend the current regime and fight with political dissidents, as well as encourage hatred towards members of individual nations in the region and vulnerable social groups. Several different methodologies have been noticed as a way to achieve this. First of all, a direct attack on any important actor who tries to criticize the regime, then spinning the public with a sensationalist story, which often has elements of hate speech and contains disinformation, as well as continually keeping citizens in fear of new conflicts in the region while ignoring current topics of public interest.

Numerous reports by media researchers and investigative journalists point to a close link between the media spreading fake news, hate speech and propaganda with the governing structure.

Dragan Vučićević, owner and editor-in-chief of the tabloid *Informer*, openly supports the Serbian Progressive Party in his public appearances and articles, as well as the editorial policy of his media, which could be seen in the analysis presented earlier in the article. It was precisely *Informer* that was awarded 14,800,000 dinars in the competitions for project co-financing of the media during 2017 and 2018 (EUR 123,000).

Saša Blagojević, the owner of the tabloid *Alo* and TV Studio B, media that unequivocally support the current government, while at the same time being characterized by fake news, propaganda and hate speech, received multimillion amounts from the city of Belgrade through project co-financing of the media:

*“As usual, the city television channel Studio B was awarded even more than 17 million dinars for three projects (EUR 143,000.00). If we take into account that since last year, the owner of that television channel, Saša Blagojević, who also owns the company that publishes Alo, and who received five and a half million dinars in this competition for the project ‘I love Belgrade’, 22.5 million dinars (EUR 1,875,000) were poured into the same coffers, i.e. almost a third of the entire amount. According to media reports, businessman Saša Blagojević is a school mate and close acquaintance of the current Minister of Finance and former Mayor of Belgrade Siniša Mali” (Nikoletić, 2019).<sup>24</sup>*

During 2017 and 2018, the owner of the tabloid *Kurir*, Igor Žeželj, received RSD 850,000 (EUR 7,000) from the government through project co-financing,

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<sup>24</sup> Nikoletić, I., (2019). *Millions to tabloids and companies associated with the progressives* (online). *Danas*. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/milioni-tabloidima-i-firmama-povezanim-sa-naprednjacima/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

and there are indications that the work of this tabloid is also supported by the public company Telekom Srbija (Insajder, 2020)<sup>25</sup>.

The tabloid Srpski Telegraf, which received the most money from the government during 2017 and 2018 through project co-financing – RSD 17,207,000 (EUR 143,000)<sup>26</sup> (Raskrikavanje, 2019) has four owners, one of whom—Lazar Simić—was found to have a connection with the governing structure: “According to data from KRIK’s database of politicians’ property, Lazar Simić is a lawyer who worked in the office of Igor Isailović, a business partner of Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and the right hand of former Belgrade mayor and now finance minister Siniša Mali.” (Vučić, M. and Radojević, V. 2020)<sup>27</sup>

Željko Mitrović, the owner of Pink television, has openly supported every government through the work of this television channel since its foundation, which was confirmed by the media advisor to the current president of Serbia, Suzana Vasiljević: “Željko Mitrović was a friend of both Boris Tadić and Zoran Đinđić, which means that Željko Mitrović was a friend of everyone in power” (Insajder, 2020).<sup>28</sup> Pink Television and the tabloid print media are connected business- and programme-wise. Thus, the editor of Informer was the author and host of the political show on Pink TV “Teška reč”, for which Pink paid Informer multimillion amounts, far beyond the market value, while at the same time the content of the show was characterized by their usual practice of supporting the current regime.<sup>29</sup> The fact that Pink TV has certain privileges and government support for the content it broadcasts is also evidenced by the data that shows that this television channel has been allowed to defer the repayment of the tax debt for the previous four years, in the amount of RSD 1.52 billion (EUR 12,600,000).<sup>30</sup>

The following table shows, through different categories, the ownership structure, as well as the circulation and share of the media that are leaders in spreading propaganda, disinformation and hate speech in Serbia.

25 Insajder. (2020). Available at: [https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/18855/TA%C4%8CKA-2-Mediji-kao-mehanizam-uz-pomo%C4%87-kojeg-se-lak%C5%A1e-vlada-\(EMISIJA\).htm](https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/18855/TA%C4%8CKA-2-Mediji-kao-mehanizam-uz-pomo%C4%87-kojeg-se-lak%C5%A1e-vlada-(EMISIJA).htm) (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

26 Raskrikavanje. (2019). Available at: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/kesformisanje/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

27 Vučić, M. and Radojević, V. (2020). At least 945 fake news stories on the front pages of four tabloids in 2019 (online). Raskrikavanje. Available at: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=557> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

28 Insajder (2020). Available at: [https://insajder.net/sr/saji/tema/18750/Ta%C4%8Dka-prvi-deo-\(VIDEO\).htm](https://insajder.net/sr/saji/tema/18750/Ta%C4%8Dka-prvi-deo-(VIDEO).htm) (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

29 Kostić, V. and Čodanović, N. (2020). Pink paid millions for Vučićević’s show (online). CINS. Available at: <https://www.cins.rs/milionske-isplate-pinka-za-vucicevicevu-emisiju/> (accessed on: 29 June 2020)

30 Milivojević, A. (2019). Millions from the citizens’ pockets go to entitled media. (online). CINS. Available at: <https://www.cins.rs/podobnim-medijima-milioni-iz-dzepa-gradjana/?fbclid=IwAR296srLax7NuPn3C6oIS9IT5ITXqy4Nia8Ph7w8m5z51ZZVJzn88gH3WDM> (accessed on: 28 May 2020)

## REACH AND OWNERSHIP OF MEDIA THAT SYSTEMATICALLY SPREAD HATE SPEECH, DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

Table 3

MEDIA	CIRCULATION/ SHARE	MEDIA GROUP	OWNER	RECENT CHANGE IN OWNERSHIP
INFORMER	135,874 printed copies 100,239 copies sold	/	Dragan Vučićević 100%	/
ALO	75,027 printed copies 45,652 copies sold	/	Saša Blagojević 100%	Ringier Axel Springer owned it until 2017
SRPSKI TELEGRAF	2%	/	Ljubomir Dabović 55% Lazar Simić 15% Milan Lađević 15% Saša Milovanović 15%	/
KURIR	69,325 printed copies 41,223 copies sold	Adrija medija grupa	Igor Žeželj 100%	/
PINK	15,46%	/	Željko Mitrović 100%	/
STUDIO B	0,6%	/	Saša Blagojević 59,75%	It was owned by Maksim medija (Ružica Krdžić) until 2018
HEPI	9,03%	/	Predrag Ranković 100%	/

## THE OWNER OF SEVERAL MEDIA COVERED BY THE ANALYSIS

Table 4

OWNER	MEDIA OWNED BY HIM	COMPANIES OWNED BY HIM IN THE MEDIA SECTOR	COMPANIES OWNED BY HIM THAT ARE NOT IN THE MEDIA SECTOR	RELATIONS WITH THE GOVERNMENT/ POLITICIANS
Saša Blagojević	Alo, Studio B	Global Media Technology (owner of Studio B)	Marketing and consulting agency Trilenium	The media state that Blagojević is a friend of the Minister of Finance, Siniša Mali, with whom he went to school <sup>31</sup>

31 Nikoletić, I. (2020). State millions to fund lies, hate and government propaganda (online). *Danas*. Available at: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/drzavni-milioni-za-finansiranje-lazi-mrznje-i-propagande-vlasti/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

## 5. PROPAGANDA OF MEDIA WITH THE NATIONAL FREQUENCY

Media unprofessionalism, as a symptom of a lack of autonomy, is a general feature of the media in Serbia, while reasoned debate or criticism, as well as fact-based professional reporting, can be seen in a very small number of media. The latest Freedom House report cites N1 television and the daily newspaper Danas as examples of professional media, pointing out that their influence is limited (Šajkaš, M., 2020).<sup>32</sup>

Propaganda bias and the use of illegal practices are primarily the characteristics of tabloids in their print and online editions, although such approaches can also be seen on television channels with the national frequency. In Serbia, two public broadcasting services currently have the national frequency—RTS and RTV, as well as commercial television channels B92, Prva, Pink and Happy. Although public broadcasting services and some commercial television channels (except Pink and Happy TV) do not use open and systematic propaganda reporting and direct hate speech, nor is the disinformation in their programmes produced in a systematic way, research has shown that their coverage of important topics serves the same purpose—the promotion of the governing structure and the simultaneous discrediting or invisibility of political dissidents and critics of the government. These conclusions were reached through several studies conducted by organizations in Serbia. Thus, CINS investigative journalists came into possession of an unpublished REM report on media coverage during the 2016 election campaign, from which it can be concluded that “almost all television channels with the national frequency broadcast shows, regular and special, in which Vučić was mostly promoted” (Kostić, V. and Đorđević, D, 2019).<sup>33</sup> After monitoring the main news programmes of commercial television channels with the national frequency, the researchers of the Novi Sad School of Journalism concluded that these programmes “avoid all scandals or sensitive topics that could indicate that political and economic elites and centres of power are not doing the job for which they have been adequately mandated by citizens and/or are not credible people themselves” (Valić Nedeljković and Isakov, 2020:104). At the same time, BIRODI, after monitoring national television channels and N1 television, concludes that “most pro-regime private television channels have almost no neutral content, that is, analytical, objective shows and confrontations, but are instead dominated exclusively by advertising, praise, propaganda and PR materials, when it comes to the leaders of the current government” (Nikoletić, I, 2020).<sup>34</sup>

32 Šajkaš, M. (2020). *Freedom House report: Serbia is abandoning democratic principles, most of the media are under the control of the ruling party* (online). Cenolovka. Available at: <https://www.cenolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/izvestaj-fridom-hausa-srbija-napusta-demokratske-principe-vecina-medija-pod-kontrolom-vladajuce-stranke/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

33 Kostić, V. and Đorđević, D. (2019). *A secret REM report: Television channels in the service of Vučić before the elections*. (online). CINS. Available at: <https://www.cins.rs/tajni-izvestaj-rem-a-televizije-pred-izbore-u-sluzbi-vucica/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

34 Nikoletić, I. (2020). *RTS criticized Vučić for an entire 13 seconds in a month and a half*. (online). Danas. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/rt-s-kritikovao-vucica-citavih-13-sekundi-za-mesec-i-podana/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

The practice of biased and incomplete reporting on important social issues, which also promotes the governing structure, can also be attributed to public broadcasting services. During 2019, the Novi Sad School of Journalism analyzed the work of public broadcasting services and found that both RTS and RTV left out topics of public interest from their reporting, topics that would jeopardize the transparency of work of state institutions and unsuccessful operations of public companies, as well as cover up scandals and cases of corruption. Also, manipulative and self-promotional statements of high state officials, as well as direct hate speech, were broadcast without critical review (an example of that is the addressing of Albanians as Shiptars, done by the Minister of Defence Aleksandar Vulin, and RTV did not distance itself from such a statement, nor did it criticize it) (Valić Nedeljković and Isakov, 2020).

RTS and RTV left out topics of public interest from their reporting, topics that would jeopardize the transparency of work of state institutions and unsuccessful operations of public companies, as well as cover up scandals and cases of corruption.

Although neither RTS nor RTV can be characterized as generators, nor as constant broadcasters of disinformation or hate speech, investigative journalists still notice that some of the public broadcasting services publish disinformation. By searching for deconstructed fake news on the Fakenews tragač portal, analysts of this platform for the analysis of the credibility of reporting found that RTV ranks 14th on the ranking list of media that publish fake news. Among such content on RTV was a news story in which the victim of violence was presented as a hooligan (Fakenews tragač, 2019),<sup>35</sup> as well as false news about the owner of a bakery in Belgrade who allegedly showed the symbol of Greater Albania with his hands (Čovs, L, 2019).<sup>36</sup> At the same time, RTS rarely publishes fake news, so the fake news published in September 2019 served all the more to confirm the findings of both indirect and direct support for the governing structure. On that occasion, RTS, in its main news, published a tweet by the editor of the tabloid Informer, Dragan Vučićević, in which he accused the president of the opposition Democratic Party, Zoran Lutovac, of keeping a framed photo in his office showing him (Dragan Vučićević) behind bars. After this, numerous media associations and journalists reacted; however, RTS did not further mention this mistake. (Živanović, K, 2019).<sup>37</sup>

Who are the owners and how are the television channels with the national frequency, included in this group of media in which the use of a biased propaganda approach for the purpose of promoting the current government has been noticed occasionally or around certain topics, financed? According to the Law on Public Broadcasting Services, public broadcasting services

35 Fakenews tragač. (2019). Public broadcasting service of Vojvodina in the service of lies: it is the victim's fault. (online). Available at: <https://fakenews.rs/2019/10/16/javni-servis-vojdovine-u-sluzbi-lazi-kriva-je-zrtva/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

36 Čovs, L. (2019). Bread and circuses with human lives. (online). Fakenews tragač. Available at: <https://fakenews.rs/2019/05/01/hleba-i-igara-ljudskim-zivotima/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

37 Živanović, K. (2019). Why did RTS quote Informer's lies in their news? (online). Danas. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/zasto-je-rts-u-vestima-citirao-informerove-lazi/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

are financed through a subscription mechanism, which is mandatory for all citizens who have an electricity meter, then from the budget of the Republic of Serbia, under strictly limited conditions, as well as from other sources of income.

At the same time, commercial television channels with the national frequency have very concentrated private ownership, which can be seen in the tables below. The change in the ownership of Prva and B92 television channels happened in 2018 with numerous suspicions that the state then re-entered the ownership of private media through the public company Telekom Srbija: “Srđan Milovanović, the former owner of the Kopernikus cable system, bought two television channels with the national frequency – B92 and Prva, from the Greek Antenna Group at the end of 2018. Due to the transaction that took place between Telekom, Kopernikus Cable System and two television channels in just one month, the public got the impression that the state had thus become the owner of two television channels through Telekom” (Insajder, 2020).<sup>38</sup>

## REACH AND OWNERSHIP OF MEDIA OUTLETS WHERE PROPAGANDA REPORTING HAS BEEN OBSERVED

Table 5

MEDIA	SHARE	MEDIA GROUP	OWNER	RECENT CHANGE IN OWNERSHIP
PRVA	9,63%	Kopernikus corporation	Srđan Milovanović 100%	Owned by Antena Group until 2018
B92 (previously O2)	4,58%	Kopernikus corporation	Srđan Milovanović 100%	Owned by Antena Group until 2018

## THE OWNER OF SEVERAL MEDIA COVERED BY THE ANALYSIS

Table 6

OWNER	MEDIA OWNED BY HIM	COMPANIES OWNED BY HIM IN THE MEDIA SECTOR	COMPANIES OWNED BY HIM THAT ARE NOT IN THE MEDIA SECTOR	RELATIONS WITH THE GOVERNMENT/ POLITICIANS
Srđan Milovanović	Prva TV, Prva TV (Montenegro), B92, B92.rs, Prva.rs, Play radio + cable channels	Kopernikus production, Content & Rights	Kopernikus Hotel Prag, Kopernikus Logistics, Kopernikus Hotels and Restaurants, Kopernikus Real Estate, Partner Gradnja ZND, Kopernikus Cars (Switzerland)	brother of Zvezdan Milovanović, a senior official of the ruling SNS

<sup>38</sup> Insajder. (2020). Available at: [https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/18750/Ta%C4%8Dka-prvi-deo-\(VIDEO\).htm](https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/18750/Ta%C4%8Dka-prvi-deo-(VIDEO).htm) (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

## 6. CONCLUSION

Many years of attempts to ensure media autonomy and reporting in the public interest, starting with the adoption of the Law on Public Information and Media, abolition and sale of state ownership in the media to private owners, and the introduction of co-financing of media projects of public interest, to the establishment of regulatory and self-regulatory bodies – REM and the Press Council, indicate that there is a formal basis for the work of professional media that would report in the public interest. However, inadequate sanctioning of controversial media practices, as well as abuse of the mechanism for co-financing media projects, which results in co-financing of media that systematically place content that spreads disinformation, hate speech and propaganda, indicate that the formal legal framework is not functional.

Civil society in Serbia has mechanisms and platforms that monitor and analyze the work and funding of the media, such as the research portals Fakenews tragač, Raskrikavanje, BIRODI, CINS and BIRN. The self-regulatory body of the Press Council is also active. They all continuously deconstruct media manipulations and disinformation and point out violations of laws and codes. However, their work is subject to insults and threats from high-ranking state officials, who even obstruct their work with numerous lawsuits.<sup>39</sup>

The citizens of Serbia are primarily presented with media content in which topics of public interest are neglected, i.e. these topics are dealt with by short-reach media.

The citizens of Serbia are primarily presented with media content in which topics of public interest are neglected, i.e. these topics are dealt with by short-reach media, whose reports are neglected or attacked by media with national coverage. At the same time, citizens are systematically provided with content that propagates power, spreads disinformation and incites hatred towards dissidents or neighbouring nations. In that way, the general public is prevented from accessing credible information and developing critical awareness. In most media outlets, which place controversial narratives, research has shown a close connection between media owners and governing structures. These indicators point to the possibility that the sustention and spread of such a media model in Serbia is in the interest of the current governing structure, in order to keep citizens in a constant state of existential concern through the media, with daily encouragement of polarization, hatred and intolerance. Through the most popular television channels and newspapers, citizens are deceived by the media being silent about issues and problems of public interest, along with simultaneous hateful, disinformation and propaganda attacks on anyone who tries to point to any of the problems or abuses. The state uses the money of its citizens to pay and support the media to deceive

39 Jovanović, B. (2018). Popović's fourth lawsuit against KRIK (online). Krik. Available at: <https://www.krik.rs/cetvrta-popoviceva-tuzba-protiv-krik-a/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020); Vojinović, M. (2020). Vučić: Danilo is an honest young man, I promise I will defeat their lies (online). Krik. Available at: <https://www.krik.rs/vucic-danilo-je-posten-mladic-obecavam-pobedicu-njihove-lazi/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)



those same citizens, which is an obvious sign of the non-functioning of the democratic media system. Such a media policy is not in the interest of the citizens. It is possible to assume that the goal of such a policy is to maintain power, control state resources and public opinion.

Deception with constant encouragement of hatred and intolerance ultimately leads to passivation of citizens and their refusal to participate in public life. The work of public institutions thus remains completely non-transparent, left to elected representatives, who will not report their work to the citizens but will leave it to them to fight media-constructed battles in which the citizens themselves will remain eternal and the only losers.

## 7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Assembly should amend the Law on Public Information and Media in order to prevent abuses in the selection of the commission for project co-financing of media projects of public interest and establish an efficient system of decision-making on co-financing that prevents public funds from being allocated to media violating legislation and ethical norms.
- The Assembly should amend the Law on Public Information and Media in order to avoid the possibility of political influence when electing members of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media.
- The judiciary should review case-law regarding the sanctioning of cases of spreading hate speech, disinformation and propaganda in the media.
- The government should legally prescribe a mandatory media register that could transparently monitor media ownership, revenues, expenditures and ways of financing registered media.
- Media associations should create a proposal for a regulatory framework for the placement of content of public importance in the online sphere, which would prescribe significant transparency and credibility of these media platforms and a system of responsibility for the placement of unverified information and hate speech.
- Independent journalists' associations should organize advocacy campaigns to change media policy and the media system, based on investigative findings on institutional abuses that have allowed the spread of hate speech, false news and propaganda, and the operation of a media model based on these controversial practices.

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### **LIST OF INTERVIEWS:**

Marko Nedeljković, researcher and director of the Center for Media Professionalization and Media Literacy, online interview, June 2020.

Tamara Skrozza, journalist and member of the Press Council, online interview, June 2020.

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This publication is a part of the RESILIENCE project research component. The first series of research reports examines THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HATE AND PROPAGANDA MEDIA MODEL in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey.

Nine media development organizations in the Western Balkans and Turkey have joined forces under an EU-funded project 'RESILIENCE: Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey'. The three-year project is coordinated by the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media (SEENPM), a network of media development organizations in Central and South East Europe, and implemented in partnership with: the Albanian Media Institute in Tirana, the Foundation Mediacentar Sarajevo, Kosovo 2.0 in Pristina, the Montenegro Media Institute in Podgorica, the Macedonian Institute for Media in Skopje, the Novi Sad School of Journalism in Novi Sad, the Peace Institute in Ljubljana, and Bianet in Istanbul.