



South East European Network  
for Professionalization of Media

# MEDIA BIAS, LEGISLATIVE CHALLENGES, AND THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

## The Future of the Media in Serbia – Facts and Trends

Valentina Sigeti

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### OUR MEDIA:

A civil society action to generate media literacy and activism,  
counter polarisation and promote dialogue



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alongside the rise of new technologies and the evolving global conditions in the media industry, journalism and media in Serbia will face numerous challenges, particularly in the areas of basic media freedom and journalist protection, based on the findings of this research:

- There is no reliable data on the number of journalists in Serbia, or how many of them are women or members of marginalized groups.
- Media ownership in Serbia is highly concentrated, particularly in the television broadcasting sector, which affects media reporting. Channels with national frequencies often align their narratives with the government's or ruling party's agenda.
- The state and ruling party demonstrate tendencies to control the media. This is evident in the newly updated law that allows business companies engaged in electronic communications, such as the state-owned Telekom, to own media outlets. Additionally, findings indicate that some media owners at the local level are connected to the ruling party.
- Media financing is often misused to encourage biased reporting. Public calls for funding are corrupted by GONGO media organizations, which prioritize funding pro-government outlets; state advertising is not regulated by law, and the media community was left out of the discussion on new advertising laws; despite receiving the majority of its budget from citizens' subscriptions, the national public broadcaster RTS is still perceived as one of the most pro-government outlets in the country; foreign donors, including the EU, US and UK, provide significant financial support for media projects in Serbia, but there is no transparent data on the total amount of money donated.
- National minorities are represented through media outlets funded by National Councils of National Minorities. However, journalists from some of these media outlets work under political pressures and engage in self-censorship. National minorities living in the northern province of Serbia, Vojvodina, are also served by the provincial public broadcaster RTV. RTS does not provide content in the languages of the Bosnian, Vlach and Bulgarian communities in Serbia's eastern and western regions. Romani and Albanian communities are represented on RTS, but the amount of content is minimal.

- Television is the most commonly used source of news and information, with citizens watching up to eight hours of television daily. The most-watched TV news programmes are central-informative political shows on channels with national frequencies, which are widely considered pro-government.
- Only 30% of Serbian citizens trust the media. Social media is the least trusted media type, while television is the most trusted.
- The number of protests regarding media freedom has been growing in the recent years, but the right to protest has often been undermined by violence and intimidation from politicians and pro-government media.

# I.

## INTRODUCTION

This report provides examines various aspects of journalism, the media industry, and the conditions under which media outlets operate in Serbia. To explore the future of journalism, we have collected and presented fundamental data on media, media use, and trust, as well as the state of democracy. The future of media is an increasingly relevant issue, shaped by the global rise of technology and the challenges facing democracies worldwide. Key topics such as media ownership, concentration, biased reporting, corruption, and the decline of free elections are central to discussions about the future of media in Serbia.

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The research includes a review of data gathered by other media analysts, media associations, civil society organizations, marketing agencies and others who collected these data so far, as well as by directly contacting institutions and organizations for certain data. The availability of data on journalism and the media in Serbia is solid, mostly thanks to the hard work of CSOs, media and marketing organizations. Experience in this research showed that public institutions tend not to publish available information transparently or sometimes do not respond to researchers' inquiries at all. While there is extensive data on democracy and elections and a solid amount of data on the media landscape, significantly less data exists on those working in the media industry, –such as the number of journalists, freelancers, female journalists, young journalists, and journalists with different ethnic backgrounds,– as well as the socio-economic conditions in which they work. This suggests that the current discussions about the future of journalism are not prioritizing improvements of journalists' working conditions.

An extensive data set accompanies this narrative report and is presented separately on a specific platform developed within the "Our Media" project. Data collection will be used as a starting point for qualitative research on the future of the media in the country with media professionals and other relevant actors in 2025.

The research on future of the media was conducted simultaneously in all countries of the Western Balkans and in Turkey, aiming to identify and analyze the current state of play and emerging trends in media, journalism, and democracy. In the first part of the research, carried out between April and September 2024, a large set of data on journalism, media landscape, ownership and finances, media representation and participation, media use, media trust, and democracy was gathered and analyzed on the country level. The identified

trends, risks, and opportunities will be further analyzed through interviews and focus groups with different stakeholders in the second part of the research in 2025, resulting in recommendations for safeguarding journalism, media, and democracy. The research is a part of the regional project “Our Media: A Civil Society Action to Generate Media Literacy and Activism, Counter Polarization and Promote Dialogue”, implemented by nine media organizations from the Western Balkans, Turkey, and Slovenia in the period 2023–2026.

The factual data presented in the tables in this report are only the part of the extensive data collection presented in the separate data report, available at the web site of the Our media project.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Here is link to the Our media project web site: <https://seenpm.org/our-media-publications/>

## II.

# GENERAL COUNTRY DATA

The Republic of Serbia is one of the Western Balkan countries, with a population of approximately 6.6 million citizens, with around 15% of its population being youth aged 15 to 29 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024). Serbia has a high literacy rate, with 99.37% of citizens aged 10 and over being literate (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024b). Education distribution indicates that the majority (53.08%) of citizens have attained secondary education, while 16.4% have university education and 17.8% have completed only primary education (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024b). The GDP per capita is EUR 10,497 as of 2023, and has remained stable in recent years despite moderate real growth rates – 7.7% in 2021, 2.5% in 2022, 2.5% in 2023 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024b). The average salary has been increasing, reaching EUR 734.50 in 2023 from EUR 562 in 2021 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024b; 2023, 2022). However, the annual inflation rate was 7.6% and consumer prices increased by an average 12.1% in 2023 (Milutinović, 2024) which at the same time led to a higher cost of living for citizens.

Table 1: GENERAL COUNTRY DATA

Total population of the country in 2023	6,641,197
Population literacy rate in 2023	99.37% <sup>2</sup> (2022)
GDP per capita in the country in 2023	EUR 10,497
Average salary in the country in 2023	EUR 734.5 (RSD 86,000)

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2 Population aged 10 and over.



### III.

# THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM

There is no reliable number regarding how many journalists there are in Serbia, but data collected by combining data from the Central Register of Compulsory Social Insurance (CROSO) and the Statistical Business Register (SPR) recognizes 12,648 media workers (in 2022), 46% of whom are women (Independent Journalists Association of Serbia). Media workers, in this context, are not only journalists but also other employees in the media industry. It is important to mention that the number of workers in the media industry in Serbia is rising (Independent Journalists Association of Serbia).

Although the number of media workers is increasing, the number of young people enrolling in journalism and communication studies in state universities has been decreasing over the past three years (369 students enrolled in the first year of bachelor and master studies in the three state faculties in the 2023/2024 academic year, in comparison to 372 students in 2022/2023, and 379 students in 2021/2022). The decline in enrolment could reflect the increasingly hostile environment for journalists in Serbia, where a growing number of attacks and legal pressures make the profession less appealing to young people. For instance, the Independent Journalists Association of Serbia registered 183 attacks on journalists in 2023, a sharp rise compared to 137 in 2022 and 156 in 2021. SLAPP cases against journalists are also said to be on the rise, according to the EU Annual Report and the Balkan Civil Society Development Network.<sup>3</sup>

The future of journalism and young journalists in Serbia is also significantly influenced by poor conditions and the fact that current journalists' salaries are typically below the national average<sup>4</sup>, alongside weak or inactive journalist

The future of journalism and young journalists in Serbia is also significantly influenced by poor conditions and the fact that current journalists' salaries are typically below the national average<sup>4</sup>, alongside weak or inactive journalist unions.<sup>5</sup>

3 The Balkan Civil Society Development Network stated in its report that there is no verified, precise number of SLAPP lawsuits in Serbia, but it is stated that SLAPPs have been increasing in all Western Balkans countries, except Montenegro. The increase of SLAPPs, specially launched by members of national and local authorities, is also stated in the EU Annual Report on Serbia 2023. The Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE) stated in its report that there was 0.32 SLAPP cases per 100,000 of the population in Serbia (or 28) from 2010 to 2022 (Bosilkova-Antovska & Mladenovska, 2024; European Commission, 2023; Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe, 2023).

4 The majority of journalists stated in the Independent Journalist Association of Vojvodina's research in 2021 that their salary is within a range of EUR 436–512 (RSD 51,000–60,000). The average salary in 2021 was about EUR 635 (RSD 74,629) (Milić et al, 2021; Republički zavod za statistiku, 2022b, February 25).

unions<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, they face threats and inadequate working conditions, which can be extremely demotivating for those interested in pursuing this profession in the future. Despite intentions to develop and negotiate a collective agreement on journalists' labour rights, as outlined in the Media Strategy, this has not yet been realized (Sindikat novinara Srbije, 2024, May 7; Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 11/2020-10).

Another problem is that journalistic sources and confidential communications are not fully and effectively protected in Serbia, nor are journalists effectively shielded from surveillance and other intrusive monitoring measures. Although the Law on Public Information and Media includes provisions to protect journalistic confidentiality, in BIRN's Report from 2022 it is stated that some journalists' sources have been endangered due to uncontrolled surveillance. It is also said that the state authorities are, in a large number of cases, frequently accessing citizens' data without authorization, which directly and indirectly undermines journalists' work (Maksić, 2022). Additionally, there have been publicly known cases with well-founded concerns that journalists from KRIK and N1, as well as journalists Veran Matić, Vuk Cvijić, Ljiljana Smajlović, and Branko M. Žujović, have been under surveillance (NUNS, 2021, March 22; Mirković, 2020, August 29; Žujović, 2024, June 2; Tatalović, 2020, March 12). This continued violation of journalists' privacy rights remains a pressing issue, highlighting the need for stronger enforcement of the Law on Public Information and Media to ensure journalists—especially investigative reporters—can work freely. Such violations often serve as intimidation tactics to deter journalists or unlawfully control their work, posing serious challenges to the future of journalism in Serbia.

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Professional associations of journalists are actively defending media freedom and the professionalization of journalism, as they are constantly carrying out different activities like in-house or external training programmes for journalists. Nonetheless, a visible polarization exists among journalists' along political lines, exacerbated by the rise of government-aligned GONGO media organizations. These GONGO organizations have primarily influenced decisions on which media outlets receive funding from state-sponsored initiatives, further contributing to the political divisions within the media landscape and increasing political influence on editorial policies (Popović, A., 2019, September 13; Cenčolovka, 2021, March 8; NUNS, 2024, June 26).

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5 The Trade Union of Journalists of Serbia does exist (<http://www.sinos.rs/>); however, according to expert estimation, it lacks significant influence and does not contribute to improving the journalism profession. This is largely due to the fact that most journalists are not union members, and privately-owned media outlets do not have their own unions. The Union which is active in Serbia is a branch Union for culture, art and media "Nezavisnost", which is part of the "Coalition for Freedom of the Media" consisting of several professional associations. This branch Union was visibly active within the provincial public broadcaster Radio-television Vojvodina (RTV) too, where its representative often publicly talks about the violations of labour rights and other issues within RTV.

Serbia's only self-regulatory body, the Press Council, introduced a Code of Ethics for journalists in 2015, with a revised version adopted in June of 2024, which is still not published. The draft includes provisions addressing ethical challenges such as artificial intelligence and personal data protection. Notably, a new principle requires journalists to "do no harm" to individuals, responding to recent disinformation and offensive campaigns often directed against independent journalists, and political opponents, including activists and opposition members.

The lack of reliable data on journalists, the dangerous conditions they face, violations of their privacy rights, poor working environments, and the absence of a collective agreement on labour rights are all critical challenges that must be addressed to prevent the continued decline of the journalism profession in Serbia.

Table 2: **DATA ON JOURNALISTS AND JOURNALISM**

<b>Overall number of journalists in 2023</b>	12,648 <sup>6</sup> (2022)
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: (overall number of journalists growing, declining or remaining the same)</b>	Growing - 12,182 (2020), 12,379 (2021), 12,648 (2022)
<b>Number of students of journalism (and communication and media studies) in 2023/2024</b>	369 <sup>7</sup>
<b>TREND in the past 3 years (growing, declining or remaining the same number of students of journalism)</b>	Declining - 379 (2021/2022), 372 (2022/2023), 369 (2023/2024)
<b>Average salary of journalists in 2023</b>	EUR 436–512 (RSD 51.000–60.000) (2021)

6 The data represents the number of media workers, which does not include only journalists. This data is based on combining data from the Central Register of Compulsory Social Insurance (CROSO) and the Statistical Business Register (SPR) (Independent Journalists Association of Serbia). The term "employee" means citizens who have a formal legal employment contract, i.e. an employment-based relationship with the employer for a fixed or indefinite period of time and citizens who work outside the employment relationship on the basis of a work contract or on the basis of a contract for performing temporary and casual work; citizens who perform independent activities or are the founders of companies or entrepreneurial activities.

7 The number represents the total number of bachelor and master students enrolled in the first year of studies with the major Journalism and the major Communication at state-owned faculties (without data for master's studies in Communication at the Faculty of Political Science Belgrade).

<b>Number of attacks on journalists (and media) in the country in 2023 (including threats, intimidation, smear campaigns, physical attacks)</b>	183
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the number of attacks on journalists growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	Declining - 42 (2023) 55 (2022)
<b>Number of complaints to the relevant national-level self-regulatory body in 2023</b>	125
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Number of complaints to the relevant national-level self-regulatory body is growing, declining or remaining the same?</b>	Growing - 110 (2021), 84 (2022), 125 (2023)

## IV.

# THE FUTURE OF MEDIA

### 4.1. CONCEPT OF MEDIA

The Law on Public Information and Media (Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 92/2023-188) defines media outlets as platforms which deliver editorially structured information, ideas, and opinions for public distribution through words, images, or sound. This includes daily and periodical newspapers, news agencies, and radio and television broadcasters, as well as digital editions such as editorial websites. In 2023, the law was amended to recognize “civil sector media” as outlets that serve the public interest and address the needs of specific social groups and citizen organizations.

Table 3: DATA ON CONCEPT OF MEDIA

Is the definition of media established in national regulation? YES/NO	YES
Has the definition/concept of media and legal obligations arising from the legal definition of media been the subject of public debate and contesting arguments? YES/NO	PARTLY <sup>8</sup>

### 4.2. MEDIA LANDSCAPE

In 2023, there were 2,592 registered media outlets in the country, according to the Serbian Business Registers Agency’s Media Register. This marks an increase from 2,545 media outlets in 2022 and 2,443 media outlets in 2021. It is important to note that the online media significantly contributed to this growth, with 1,113 outlets being categorized as “independent electronic editions, internet portals” and “independent electronic editions, editorially shaped websites”. The number of online media has risen steadily, from 956 in 2021 to 1,050 in 2022 and 1.113 in 2023.

<sup>8</sup> There were debates, but they were not necessarily about the definition of media. Instead, they focused on specific articles in the proposals of certain updated media laws, particularly concerning provisions such as Articles 39 and 41 of the proposed Law on Electronic Media, which allow state-owned companies to own media outlets.

In the same period, the number of daily and weekly print media outlets increased slightly with the introduction of the daily newspaper Nova in 2021, and the weekly newspaper Radar in 2024. Radar was established by journalists from NIN as a response to the change in NIN's ownership (FoNet, 2024, February 13).<sup>9</sup>

On the other side, the number of radio outlets has declined slightly, dropping to 307 in 2023 from 310 in 2022.

There are two public service media outlets in the country: Radio-television of Serbia (RTS), serving as the national broadcaster, and Radio-television of Vojvodina (RTV) serving the northern autonomous province of Serbia. In addition to RTS's channels, RTS1 and RTS2, there are four other commercial national TV channels with news content (Pink, Happy, Prva, B92). A fifth national frequency was expected to be allocated but was not awarded with the other four (Regulatorno telo za elektronske medije, 2022). Although the deadline for its allocation has passed, the president of REM's Council Olivera Zekić, stated that the decision regarding the fifth national frequency would not be made until the legal disputes with TV Nova S have been resolved (Beta, 2024, August 9). This highlights broader concerns about REM's effectiveness and its ability to fulfil its mandate as the regulatory body.

The total number of national radio channels with news content in 2023 was seven, including four commercial radio stations with national frequencies (Hit, Play, S, S2), and three public radio stations (Radio Belgrade 1, Radio Belgrade 2, Radio Belgrade 202) (Regulatorno telo za elektronske medije, 2022).

The total number of daily newspapers in 2023 was 10 (Informer, Kurir, Alo, Srpski telegraf, Politika, Večernje novosti, Danas, Nova, Sportski žurnal, Vesti) as well as five weekly newspapers (Vreme, NIN, Nedeljnik, Pečat, Ekspres) with one more that started publishing in 2024 (Radar).

The growth in the number of media outlets in Serbia is an encouraging development, especially in light of the challenges facing the journalistic profession. While the increase of online media aligns with global trends, the establishment of new print media outlets, such as the daily Nova and the weekly Radar, highlights the efforts of journalists to establish new platforms for reporting despite significant obstacles.

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9 Journalists left the NIN following allegations that Ringier Srbija had gifted the ownership of NIN to its former general director Jelena Drakulić Petrović, which she denied, stating that she bought the newspaper (Vučić & Ljubičić, 2023, August 29; Beta, 2024, January 24).

Table 4: DATA ON THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

<b>Total number of media in the country in 2023</b>	2.592
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the number of media growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	Growing - 2,443 (2021), 2,545 (2022), 2,592 (2023)
<b>Total number of public service media in the country (national, local) in the country in 2023</b>	2 <sup>10</sup>
<b>Total number of daily newspapers in the country in 2023.</b>	10 <sup>11</sup>
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the number of daily newspapers in the country growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	Growing <sup>12</sup>
<b>Total number of national TV channels with news content in the country in 2023</b>	6 <sup>13</sup>
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the number of national TV channels with news content in the country growing, declining or remaining the same?</b>	Same <sup>14</sup>

10 There are two public broadcast systems with multiple media outlets: Radio-television of Serbia (RTS) (national) (<https://rts.rs/sr/index.html>) and Radio-television of Vojvodina (RTV) (provincial) (<https://www.rtv.rs/>). RTS operates as both a television and radio broadcaster. Its television channels include: RTS 1, RTS 2, RTS 3, RTS Svet, RTS Nauka, RTS Drama, RTS Život, RTS Klasika, RTS Kolo, RTS Trezor, RTS Muzika, and RTS Poletarac, while its radio stations include: Radio Beograd 1, Radio Beograd 2, Radio Beograd 3, Radio Beograd 202, Radio Pletenica Arhiv, Radio Rokenrol, Radio Džuboks, Radio Vrteška, and Radio Džezer. RTV also operates as both a television and radio broadcaster as well. Its television channels are RTV 1 and RTV 2, while its radio stations include Radio Novi Sad 1, Radio Novi Sad 2, Radio Novi Sad 3, and Oradio. The RTV 1 television channel broadcasts in Serbian language, while RTV 2 airs in minority languages, including Hungarian, Slovak, Romanian, Ruthenian, Romani, Croatian, Bunjevac, Ukrainian, and Macedonian. Radio Novi Sad 1 broadcasts in Serbian, Radio Novi Sad 2 in Hungarian, and Radio Novi Sad 3 broadcasts programmes in 14 minority languages (Slovak, Romanian, Ruthenian, Ukrainian, Romani, Macedonian, Croatian, Bunjevac, Montenegrin, Albanian, German, Bulgarian, Russian, and Czech). Oradio functions as an internet radio station aimed at youth. Both public services also have online portals.

11 Informer (<https://informer.rs/>), Kurir (<https://www.kurir.rs/>), Alo (<https://www.alo.rs/>), Srpski telegraf (<https://www.republika.rs/>), Politika (<https://www.politika.rs/>), Večernje novosti (<https://www.novosti.rs/c/>), Danas (<https://www.danas.rs/>), Nova (<https://nova.rs/>), Sportski žurnal (<https://www.zurnal.rs/>), Vesti (<https://www.vesti-online.com/>).

12 Newspaper Nova (<https://nova.rs/>) started publishing in 2021.

13 Public broadcaster RTS 1 and RTS 2, as well as commercial TV with national broadcasting license: Pink (<https://www.pink.rs/>), Happy (<https://happytv.rs/>), Prva (<https://www.prva.rs/>), and B92 (<https://b92.tv/>).

14 The number of national TV channels with news content has remained the same over the past three years, with a fifth frequency expected to be assigned but being delayed.

<b>Total number of online news media in the country in 2023</b>	1.113 <sup>15</sup>
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the number of online news media in the country growing, declining or remaining the same?</b>	Growing - 956 (2021), 1,050 (2022), 1,113 (2023)

### 4.3. MEDIA OWNERSHIP

The three biggest media owners in Serbia, based on the market share, are Pink Media Group (35.12%), Mondo Inc (13.34%), and United Group (13.06%). Pink Media Group and Mondo Inc are owned by Serbian citizens, while United Group is owned by the company BC Partners (which is owned by other companies) and Serbian businessman Dragan Šolak. It is difficult to state which country this group originates from since several countries are connected (BIRN, 2023b; 2023h).

Although media ownership concentration is formally regulated in Serbian law, it is not enforced in practice. According to the 2023 Media Ownership Monitor, the top eight media owners control 92.55% of the market. This level of concentration is rated as high risk, which applies when the top eight owners hold more than 70% of the market across different media sectors (BIRN, 2023b). This high level of concentration undermines efforts to prevent media monopolies and promote media pluralism.

According to the 2023 Media Ownership Monitor, the top eight media owners control 92.55% of the market.

The Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) report by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (Milutinović, 2024) identified potential risks to media pluralism in Serbia, rating them as medium risk in the field of Fundamental Protection and as high risk in the fields of Market Plurality, Political Independence and Social Inclusiveness. Regarding Market Plurality, it should be noted that the Law on Public Information and Media “prescribes the prohibition of monopoly in the public information sphere, by setting thresholds for the concentration of media ownership that are too high”. The updated Law on Public Information and Media in 2023 permitted distribution through affiliated legal entities, thereby enabling state ownership through the internet and cable provider Telekom. Allowing state-companies to establish and manage media outlets increases the likelihood that their interest will entirely align with those of the government, leading to a threatening consolidation of power.

As has already been said, media ownership concentration exists in Serbia, particularly in the broadcasting sector. In BIRN’s Media Ownership Monitor

<sup>15</sup> Registered within Serbian Business Registers Agency as “Independent electronic editions, internet portals” and “Independent electronic editions, editorially shaped website”.



it is stated that it is not possible to accurately calculate media ownership concentration because “although the Serbian Business Registers Agency provides financial information on revenues, no financial information is available on specific horizontal markets, such as television, online, print, and radio” (BIRN, 2023b). This lack of data creates a serious obstacle to achieving transparency in media ownership. However, practical examples do suggest monopolistic trends, as state-owned Telekom Serbia has been allowed to acquire and own various media outlets. Most recently, Telekom is reported to be acquiring Mondo Inc, the publisher of the Kurir daily newspaper and owner of Kurir television, following its earlier purchase of Kopernikus TV (N1, 2024, September 26; Rilak, 2020, August 24). The lack of transparency surrounding these acquisitions by the state-owned Telekom raises concerns about potential conflicts of interest and further consolidation of state influence over the media landscape.

Practical examples do suggest monopolistic trends, as state-owned Telekom Serbia has been allowed to acquire and own various media outlets.

Media ownership transparency is regulated by the Law on Public Information and Media, and ownership data are available in the Media Register, an online database managed by the Serbian Business Registry (APR). The Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) maintains a registry for the electronic media sector. However, these regulations have not stopped proxy ownership or concealed affiliations between media owners and political parties in power (BIRN, 2023c).

While Serbian law formally regulates media ownership, its lack of enforcement allows a small number of owners to dominate the market, limiting the diversity of voices and perspectives in the media landscape.

Table 5: DATA ON MEDIA OWNERSHIP

<b>Name the 3 biggest media owners in the country (owners of the biggest number of media and/or with the biggest audience reach and/or biggest share in the advertising market). Add information about the country of origin for each of the 3 biggest media owners.</b>	Pink Media Group (35.12%) (Serbia), Mondo Inc (13.34%) (Serbia), United Group (13.06%) (international)
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Has the list of the top 3 media owners in the country changed? YES/NO</b>	NO
<b>Is media ownership concentration regulated in the country? YES/NO</b>	YES <sup>16</sup>
<b>Is transparency of media ownership regulated by law? YES/NO</b>	YES <sup>17</sup>
<b>Is media ownership transparent in the country (credible information about who owns media is published)? YES/NO/PARTIALLY</b>	PARTLY

#### 4.4. MEDIA FINANCING

Media in Serbia are financed through a combination of commercial activities and donations from Serbian entities and international organizations, embassies, or governments, as well as subscriptions fees.

The national public service broadcaster, RTS, received EUR 87.96 million (72.6%) of its total budget from household subscription fees. In addition to these fees, RTS is also funded through advertising revenue (EUR 29.41 million or 25.4% of total budget), public funding (the smallest amount – EUR 320.435 or 0.3% of the total budget) and other sources (amounting to 1.8%). The national public service broadcaster's budget has seen steady growth over the past three years: from EUR 116.25 million in 2021, to EUR 121.26 million

16 Article 6, Law on Public Information and Media states that "To enable citizens to form their own opinions about phenomena, events, and personalities, a diversity of information sources and media content is ensured. To protect competition and the diversity of ideas and opinions, all forms of monopoly in the field of public information are prohibited. No one may hold a monopoly on the publication of information, ideas, and opinions in the media. No one may hold a monopoly on the establishment or distribution of media."

17 Article 7, Law on Public Information and Media states that "To allow individuals to form their own opinions about the credibility and reliability of information, ideas, and opinions published in the media, to assess the possible influence of the media on public opinion, and to protect media pluralism, the transparency of media-related data is ensured."

in 2022, and EUR 125.54 million in 2023 (RTS, 2024; 2022). The monthly licence fee for public service broadcasters (RTS and RTV combined), paid by households via electricity bills, increased from EUR 2.55 in 2023 to EUR 2.98 in 2024 (Beta, 2024, July 22).

Commercial media in Serbia are mostly financed through advertising, although they may also receive public or donor funding for non-commercial content. Civil society and local media outlets, in particular, rely heavily on state and donor funding, which often constitutes a significant portion of their income. This dependency raises concerns, as local media often rely on government and local authorities for funding, leaving them vulnerable to pressure to align their reporting with political interests in order to secure financial support.

In 2023, public funding from national and local governments to media outlets totalled EUR 16.47 million, continuing a trend of steady growth over the past three years: EUR 14.02 million in 2021, EUR 15.50 million in 2022, and EUR 16.47 million in 2023 (BIRN, 2023). The amount of donor funding for media remains opaque, with estimates ranging from USD 19,693,603 to USD 30 million allocated for media projects in Serbia between 2020 and 2024 (Global Forum for Media Development, 2024).

While some aspects of state funding for media projects are partially transparent<sup>18</sup>, the total amount spent on state advertising (advertising by state bodies, institutions and state-owned companies) remains unknown. State advertising is not regulated, despite updates to two media laws in 2023 (Petronijević, 2023, October 23). In October 2024, the Coalition for Media Freedom requested that the Ministry of Internal and External Trade extend the public debate deadline for the Law on Advertising because this request followed the establishment of a Working Group for Amendments to the Law on Advertising by the Ministry of Internal and Foreign Trade, without consulting media associations or notifying the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications. The Ministry of Information and Telecommunications, responsible for implementing the Media Strategy, oversees four activities related to advertising, including public information and the advertising practices of public authorities (Koalicija za slobodu medija, 2024).

While some aspects of state funding for media projects are partially transparent<sup>18</sup>, the total amount spent on state advertising (advertising by state bodies, institutions and state-owned companies) remains unknown.

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<sup>18</sup> Allocated amounts of public funding are published in individual decisions within specific calls for funding, but there is no single database where all these allocations can be transparently tracked. However, starting in January 2025, a Unified Information System for the implementation and monitoring of co-financed projects in the field of public information is expected to be established, in accordance with the Law on Public Information and Media, Article 15 (Beta, 2024, February 2).

Table 6: **DATA ON MEDIA FINANCING**

<b>Total value of the national advertising market (including all types of media) in 2023 in EUR</b>	EUR 259 mil
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the total value of the national advertising market growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	Growing - EUR 230 mil (2021), EUR 241 mil (2022), EUR 259 mil (2023)
<b>Share of TV in the value of the national advertising market in 2023</b>	49%
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the share of TV in the value of the national advertising market growing, declining or remaining the same?</b>	Declining - 51% (2021), 51% (2022), 49% (2023)
<b>Total budget of the national public service broadcaster in 2023, in EUR</b>	EUR 125.54 mil (RSD 14,698,993,000)
<b>TREND in past 3 years: Is the total budget of public service broadcasters growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	Growing - EUR 116.25 mil (RSD 13,611,576,000) (2021), EUR 121.26 mil (RSD 14,196,057,000) (2022), EUR 125.54 mil (RSD 14,698,993,000) (2023)
<b>Share of the total budget of the national public service broadcaster in 2023 received from the state budget.</b>	0.3% (EUR 320,435 (RSD 37.5 million))
<b>Total amount of public funding (grants and subsidies) from national government and local governments to media in the country in 2023</b>	EUR 16.47 mil (RSD 1,928,939,956)
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the total amount of public funding (grants and subsidies) to the media in the country growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	Growing - EUR 14.02 mil (RSD 1,641,136,319) (2021), EUR 15.50 mil (RSD 1,814,522,997) (2022), EUR 16.47 mil (RSD 1,928,939,956) (2023)

<b>Are the obligations of public bodies, institutions and companies to publish data on funding to media regulated by law? YES/NO</b>	YES <sup>19</sup>
<b>Data on allocated amounts of public funding to media outlets are published. YES/NO</b>	PARTLY
<b>Is state advertising in the media regulated by law? YES/NO</b>	NO

## 4.5. MEDIA REPRESENTATION

Reliable data on the representation of women, young people under 40, and ethnic minorities among journalists is lacking. According to the Central Register of Mandatory Social Insurance (CROSO) and the Statistical Business Register (SPR), as reported by the Independent Journalists Association of Serbia (IJAS), 46% of media workers in 2022 were women. However, since not all media workers are journalists, this figure is not definitive.

In 2023, none of the top five most-watched TV stations, print media outlets, or online news portals had female owners. Nevertheless, in the radio sector, two women held ownership stakes. Ružica Krdžić co-owns 49% of Radio Hit FM with her husband, Miloš Krdžić, and holds shares in other radio stations including Lola, TDI, Jat, and Karolina. Similarly, Irena Anđelković co-owns 49% of Radio S, Radio S2, Radio S3 and Radio S4, and also holds shares in Radio S1 Montenegro, Radio S3 Montenegro, and Radio S Bosnia and Herzegovina with her brother (BIRN Serbia, 2023d). Among the top five news media owners across the TV, radio, print, and online sectors in 2023, 10% were foreign citizens or companies. Notable foreign owners include Michael Ringier, owner of Ringier, with additional stakes held by Mark Valder and the Swiss company Die Mobiliar. United Media, owned by Dragan Šolak, also has a significant stake

**In 2023, none of the top five most-watched TV stations, print media outlets, or online news portals had female owners.**

<sup>19</sup> Article 27, Law on Public Information and Media states that “The authority that announces the call for applications, upon the completion of project co-financing in the current year, prepares a report on the conducted calls in the field of public information, in relation to thematic and genre diversity and target groups for which the content is intended, in accordance with the definition of public interest in the field of public information from Article 15 of this law. The report is published without delay, and no later than the end of the calendar year, on the website of the authority that announced the call, as well as on the web portal of the Unified Information System for the implementation and monitoring of project co-financing in the field of public information.” as well as “The authority that announces the call for applications, no later than December 31 of the current year, publishes a report on the conducted evaluation (internal or external) for projects implemented in the previous year on its website, as well as on the web portal of the Unified Information System for the implementation and monitoring of project co-financing in the field of public information.” The Unified Information System will be in operation from 1 January 2025.

held by the British investment firm BC Partners (BIRN Serbia, 2023e). Despite women making up at least 46% of media workers, they are rarely found in top decision-making positions, such as chief editors or owners. Notably, women hold ownership stakes primarily in the radio sector, a media type that has been in decline.

Women also hold fewer positions in the national broadcasting service (RTS) and the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM). In RTS's governing body, there is only one woman alongside eight men, while the programme advisory body consists of 15 members, six of whom are women and nine are men (RTS, 2022; Regulatorno telo za elektronske medije, 2024). Additionally, the governing body includes only one person under the age of 40 (Regulatorno telo za elektronske medije, 2020; Regulatorno telo za elektronske medije, 2023; Regulatorno telo za elektronske medije, 2024b). On REM'S board in 2023, there were three women and five men, one person from an ethnic minority background, and one person under the age of 40 (Regulatorno telo za elektronske medije, n.d.).

Minority media in Serbia aim to address the communication rights and needs of major minority communities. The five largest minority groups are Hungarians, Bosniaks, Romani, Albanians, and Slovaks. In Vojvodina, the largest minority communities are Hungarians, Romani, Slovaks, Croats, and Romanians (Republički zavod za statistiku, 2023). The Hungarian, Slovak, Croatian, and Romanian communities have minority media established by their respective National Councils of National Minorities, as well as several local media outlets reporting in these languages. Conversely, Bosniak, Romani, and Albanian communities lack media outlets established by National Councils of National Minorities, but have other local media reporting in their languages, particularly in regions where these communities are concentrated (Sejdinović, 2020). However, strong ties between some minority media outlets and National Minority Councils have created challenges. Journalists from media established by the Minority National Councils report exposure to political pressure and self-censorship (Milinkov et al, 2022). Independently established minority media, by contrast, maintain editorial freedom.

Journalists from media established by the Minority National Councils report exposure to political pressure and self-censorship (Milinkov et al, 2022).

The provincial public broadcaster, Radio-television of Vojvodina (RTV), airs programmes in 11 languages, maintains dedicated newsrooms for programmes in Hungarian, Romani, Slovak, Croatian, and Romanian, as well as the Ruthenian, Bunjevac, Croatian, Ukrainian, and Macedonian communities (RTV, n.d.). The national public broadcaster, RTS, on the other hand, broadcasts limited programming in the Roma language on radio and in the Albanian language on television, which is insufficient to meet the informational needs of these two national minority groups. The Bosniak, Bulgarian, and Vlach communities are not served by dedicated minority programming on the national public broadcaster, but rely on some privately

owned or CSO-owned media outlets for reporting in their languages (Nicević Nokić, 2023, December 15; Bajrović, 2024, February 2; Far, 2023, October 13; NDNV, 2017, October 23). Given that RTS and RTV are funded by all citizens, including members of minority communities, they should equally represent these groups by providing information, education, and entertainment in their languages, thereby upholding the principles of inclusivity and equality fundamental to democratic society.

Minority media are supported through public funding at the local, provincial, and national levels. The Ministry of Information and Telecommunications finances minority media outlets through *its Call for co-financing projects aimed at producing content national minority languages*. Similarly, the Provincial Secretariat for Culture, Public Information and Relations with Religious Communities in Vojvodina supports minority media through a co-financing call for public information projects. Additionally, local governments in municipalities where minority languages are officially recognized alongside Serbian also provide funding for media content production in national minorities languages (Ministarstvo informisanja i telekomunikacija, 2023; Pokrajinski sekretarijat za kulturu, javno informisanje i odnose s verskim zajednicama, n.d.).

It is essential to collect and implement reliable statistics on specific groups in journalism— such as women, young people and minorities—to establish a foundation for improving their representation and positions in the media industry in the future.

**Table 7: DATA ON MEDIA REPRESENTATION**

<b>Share of female journalists in the country in 2023</b>	46% (2022)
<b>Share of journalists with an ethnic minority background in the country in 2023</b>	N/D
<b>Share of women among news programme editors-in-chief and managers of the top 5 TV channels with news content in the country in 2023</b>	N/D
<b>Share of persons under age of 40 among news programme editors-in chief and managers of the top 5 TV channels with news content in the country in 2023</b>	N/D

<b>Share of persons with an ethnic minority background among news programme editors-in-chief and managers of the top 5 TV channels with news content in the country in 2023</b>	N/D
<b>Share of women on the board of the national regulatory authority for media in 2023</b>	Governing body: RTS - 11% (1 woman, 8 men) Programme advisory body: RTS - 40% (6 women, 9 men)
<b>Share of persons with an ethnic minority background in the board of the national regulatory authority for media in 2023.</b>	N/D
<b>Share of persons under age of 40 in the governing/supervisory body of national public service broadcaster in 2023.</b>	Governing body: RTS - 1 person Programme advisory body: RTS - N/D
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the number of minority media in the country growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	N/D
<b>Minority media were supported by public funding in 2023. YES/NO</b>	YES
<b>Which minority communities are not served by own media or minority programming in national public service broadcasting?</b>	The Bosniak, Bulgarian, and Vlach communities



## 4.6. MEDIA PARTICIPATION

The majority of media outlets in the country provide mechanisms for citizen participation and interaction, such as comment sections on websites and social media platforms. The most common forms of (citizen) participation include commenting on websites and social media, posting on Twitter, and, to a lesser extent, engaging in discussions on forums.

Table 8: DATA ON MEDIA PARTICIPATION

<b>The majority of the media in the country commonly provide mechanisms for participation and interaction with citizens/ readers, listeners, viewers (comment sections, letters to the editor, forums, blogs, readers' editor, ombudsman, other types of complaint mechanism, membership, internship, focus groups,... ). YES/NO</b>	YES
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Number of mechanisms for participation in the media in the country is growing, declining or remaining the same (e.g. comment sections closing down or opening, ombudsman established or shut down etc.)</b>	Same.
<b>3 most common mechanisms of (citizen) participation in media in the country</b>	Commenting in Comment sections on websites and social media, Posting on Twitter, Discussions on forums.

## V.

# THE FUTURE OF MEDIA USE AND TRUST

## 5.1. MEDIA USE

Television was the most frequently used source of news and information for citizens in 2024, followed by social media (Ipsos, 2024). In 2023, the average time spent watching TV in Serbia in 2023 was 8 hours and 13 minutes (Nielsen). The most-watched TV news programmes were central-informative political shows such as Dnevnik 2 on RTS1, Nacionalni dnevnik on Pink, Vesti on Prva, Telemaster on Happy, and Dnevnik on Nova S (Karadžić et al, 2023). With the exception of Nova S, all these channels hold national frequencies and are considered pro-government.

In 2023, the average time spent watching TV in Serbia in 2023 was 8 hours and 13 minutes (Nielsen).

Young people aged 15–29 prefer social media as their primary source of information, with online news portals as a secondary choice (Stojanović et al, 2023). These trends have remained consistent over the past three years, according to surveys (Stojanović et al, 2022; 2021).

Social media had an audience reach of 69.8% in 2023, representing approximately 5.01 million citizens with accounts on social media networks (Datareportal, 2023, February 13). This trend has shown steady growth over the past three years, rising from 42% in 2020 to 52.8% in 2021, and 57% in 2022, and 69.8% last year (Datareportal, 2020, February 18; 2021, February 11; 2022, February 15).

The most popular social media platforms in the first half of 2024 were Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Among young people, preferences slightly differed, with Instagram ranking first, followed by YouTube and Facebook (Ipsos, 2024). The average time spent on social networks in 2024 was 91 minutes per day, with young people spending significantly more time – 132 minutes daily (Ipsos, 2024). Nevertheless, it is still relatively low compared to the average time spent watching TV, which remains nearly four times higher.

Table 9: **DATA ON MEDIA USE**

<b>Media type that is the most often used source of news and information for citizens in the country in 2023</b>	Television (2024) <sup>20</sup>
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Has the media type that is the most often used source of news and information for citizens in the country changed? YES/NO If yes, from which type to which type?</b>	NO
<b>Which media type was the most often used source of news and information for youth (age between 15 and 29) in the country in 2023?</b>	Social media
<b>Audience reach of the media type “Television” in the country in 2023</b>	66% <sup>21</sup>
<b>Top 3 most popular (most used, visited) social media in the country in 2023</b>	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube (2024) <sup>22</sup>
<b>Top 3 most popular (most used, visited) social media among youth (age between 15 and 29) in the country in 2023.</b>	Instagram, YouTube, Facebook (2024) <sup>23</sup>
<b>Top 3 most popular (most watched) TV news shows in the country in 2023</b>	Dnevnik 2 (RTS1), Nacionalni dnevnik (Pink), Vesti (Prva), Telemaster (Happy), Dnevnik (Nova S)
<b>Media Literacy Index for the country in 2023</b>	33 <sup>24</sup>
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the Media Literacy Index growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	Same - 4th cluster (score 33 (2023), 35 (2022), 32 (2021))
<b>Media literacy is a separate subject in elementary or secondary schools. YES/NO</b>	PARTLY <sup>25</sup>

20 Television, specifically TV News, is the most frequent (63.2%) and main source (41.6%) of current affairs for citizens of Serbia in the first half of 2024, according to Ipsos. Within CRTA research, television is also found as the most often used source of news in 2023.

21 Data indicates daily reach.

22 Stat Counter Global Stats found that the most popular social media in 2023 were Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, but Ipsos found that in the first half of 2024 the most frequently used were Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

23 Data is for users aged 12–29 years old for the first half of 2024.

24 Higher score (0-100) or lower cluster (1-5) meaning higher media literacy of population.

25 Media literacy is an optional separate subject in secondary schools and is a separate subject within additional teaching activity in elementary schools in the 5th and 6th grade. In that manner, not all pupils of Serbia will be taught media literacy within a separate subject in formal education, but could be educated on some media literacy skills in a cross-curricular way.

## 5.2. MEDIA TRUST

Overall trust in media in Serbia in 2023 was 30%, with citizens either tending to trust or fully trusting the media, according to the Balkan Public Barometer (Regional Cooperation Council, n.d.). Trust in the media has declined significantly compared to 2021, when 51% of citizens expressed similar levels of trust (Jovović & Valić Nedeljković, 2021). According to the International Republican Institute's 2024 rankings of the most trusted institutions in Serbia, the media ranked 8th out of 10, making them one of the least trusted institutions. However, this represents slight improvement compared to 2022, when the media ranked 9th, and 2020, when they were in 10th place.

According to the International Republican Institute's 2024 rankings of the most trusted institutions in Serbia, the media ranked 8th out of 10, making them one of the least trusted institutions.

The most trusted media types in early 2024 were television (particularly TV news), local TV and radio digital platforms, local daily print digital media (web & app) (Ipsos, 2024). Social media remained the least trusted media type in both 2024 and 2023, contrasting with 2021, when print newspapers and magazines were the least trusted (Jovović & Valić Nedeljković, 2021).

According to the CRTA's 2023 research (Karadžić et al, 2023), the most trusted media brands were RTS, N1, Nova S, and Happy. The top three most trusted outlets have changed over the years: in 2023, RTS, N1, and Nova S held the top positions; in 2022, they were N1, RTS, and Politika; and in 2021, RTS, Pink, and Prva led the rankings (Karadžić et al, 2023; Kleut et al, 2022; Jovović & Valić Nedeljković, 2021).<sup>26</sup>

Since 2021, when the top three most trusted media outlets in Serbia were all media brands whose TV channels had national frequency, this has changed. By 2023, two out of the four most trusted media outlets were media brands whose TV channels did not have national frequencies. This could reflect public dissatisfaction with the biases of broadcasters with national frequencies and a decline in trust in their journalistic work.

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<sup>26</sup> However, it is important to note that the most recent data from 2023 was collected during an election month, whereas the previous years were not, which could have influenced the results.

Table 10: DATA ON MEDIA TRUST

<b>Level of overall trust in media in the country in 2023 (in percentage)</b>	30% <sup>27</sup>
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the level of overall trust in media in the country growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	Declining - 30% tend to trust or totally trust media (2023), N/D (2022), 51% tend to mainly trust or completely trust in media (2021)
<b>Top 3 most trusted media types in the country in 2023</b>	Television, Local TV and radio digital, Local daily print digital (web & app) (2024) <sup>28</sup>
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Has the order of the top 3 most trusted media types in the country changed? YES/NO. Which media types have changed places among the top 3?</b>	NO
<b>In which place do the media stand in the ranking of the most trusted institutions in the country in 2023?</b>	8th out of 10 (2024)
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the ranking (place) of the media among the most trusted institutions in the country growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	Growing - 10th out of 10 (the same as political parties) (2020), 9th out of 10 (2022), 8th out of 10 (2024)
<b>In which place do journalists stand in the ranking of trusted professions in the country in 2023?</b>	N/D
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the ranking (place) of journalists among the most trusted professions in the country growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	N/D
<b>Citizens use self-regulatory mechanisms to submit complaints when they observe violations of professional conduct of media and journalists. YES/NO</b>	YES <sup>29</sup>
<b>TREND: Is the number of citizens using self-regulatory mechanisms to submit complaints when they observe violations of professional conduct of media and journalists growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	Growing - 55 (2021), 53 (2022), 74 (2023)

27 The number indicates the percentage of people who tend to trust or totally trust the media.

28 Ipsos found that in the first half of 2024, to the media citizens trusted the most were TV news (70%), Local TV and radio digital (62%), and Local daily print digital (60%). According to the Balkan Public Barometer, the most trusted media types in the country in 2023 were Public TV and radio, Private TV and radio, Online news platforms.

29 In 2023, 74 out of 125 complaints to the Press Council came from individuals.

## VI.

# THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

Serbia's Democracy Index in 2023 was 6.3, reflecting stability compared to the same score in the previous year<sup>30</sup> (Our World in Data, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c). The Index assesses civil liberties, political participation, free elections, and government functioning on a scale where 10 represents the most democratic countries. However, the Rule of Law Index declined slightly to 0.48 in 2023, compared to 0.49 in 2022 and 2021<sup>31</sup> (World Justice Project, n.d.).

Regarding the rule of law in elections, credible international and national monitoring organizations did not consider the country's most recent local, parliamentary, or presidential elections to be fair. Reports from OSCE election monitoring missions for the 2022 presidential, 2023 parliamentary, and 2024 local elections highlight recurring issues. Despite "well-organized election processes and diverse political choices for voters", systemic advantages consistently favoured the ruling coalition. Key concerns included driven biased media coverage, misuse of state resources, and pressure on public sector employees, all of which created an uneven playing field and limited fair competition (Međunarodna misija za posmatranje izbora, 2024; OSCE, 2024; 2022).

Although election legislation, including campaign laws, generally aligns with international standards, the ODIHR noted in its 2024 Election Observation Mission Final Report that several longstanding recommendations remain unaddressed. Key concerns include establishing a fair playing field, preventing the misuse of public office and state resources, separating official duties from campaign activities, implementing effective protections against voter intimidation and pressure, and enhancing stakeholder access to the Unified Voter Register (UVR) (OSCE, 2024).

Voter turnout has gradually increased in recent years. The 2023 parliamentary elections saw a turnout of 58.77%, slightly higher than the 2022 elections (58.60%), and significantly up from 48.93% in 2020 (Republički zavod za statistiku, 2024; 2022c, 2020). Similarly, participation in the 2022 presidential elections rose to 58.40%, compared to 54.34% in 2017. Turnout during the 2012 presidential elections was 57.73% in the first round and 46.26% in second

Regarding the rule of law in elections, credible international and national monitoring organizations did not consider the country's most recent local, parliamentary, or presidential elections to be fair.

30 The Index score ranges from 0 (least democratic) to 10 (most democratic).

31 The Index score ranges from 0 to 1.

round (Republički zavod za statistiku, 2022; 2017; 2012). This increase in voter turnout reflects a positive trend regarding democracy in Serbia, suggesting renewed civic engagement and greater participation in political process.

The Media Freedom Index in Serbia continued to decline, scoring 59.16 in 2023, down from 61.51 in 2022 and 67.97 in 2021<sup>32</sup> (Reporters Without Borders, 2023; 2022; 2021). This decline correlates with an increase in attacks on journalist, SLAPP cases, deteriorating working conditions, violations of journalists' privacy rights, a lack of transparency in media ownership concentration, and other factors that hinder their daily work and obstruct the functioning of free media.

Although legislation on freedom of expression and media freedom aligns with EU standards, the updated media laws introduced in November 2023 raised concerns. The new legislation restored state ownership in the media by allowing business entities engaged in electronic communications, including state-owned companies such as Telekom, to own media outlets. This change permits state-founded legal entities to hold media ownership (Stjepić, 2023, November 3). While political parties are prohibited from owning media (Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 92/2023-207), the privatization of local media in Serbia several years ago was marred by reports of media acquisitions by individuals close to the ruling party, often at prices significantly higher than their actual value (Marić, 2024, July 24; NUNS, 2015, September 3). Currently, the Republic of Serbia holds a 50% ownership stake in the daily newspaper Politika (BIRN, 2023g). The updated media law, which allows companies operating in the field of electronic communications (such as the state-owned Telekom) to own media, further entrenches state and party influence in the media landscape. These developments have contributed to the continued decline in Serbia's media freedom index and are likely to exacerbate this trend in the future.

The updated media law, which allows companies operating in the field of electronic communications (such as the state-owned Telekom) to own media, further entrenches state and party influence in the media landscape.

Corruption remains a significant issue in Serbia. The country's Corruption Perception Index was 36 in 2023, showing stagnation after a decline from 38 in 2021<sup>33</sup> (Transparency International, 2023; 2022; 2021).

While some anti-corruption policies have improved, Transparency International and other watchdog organizations have identified significant gaps, including the absence of a comprehensive national anti-corruption strategy. Although Serbia has made progress in implementing certain recommendations from the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), the lack of a fully developed anti-corruption framework and the perceived political influence over the Anti-Corruption Agency continue to hinder effective efforts to combat corruption (Transparency International Serbia, 2023b; Group of States against Corruption, Council of Europe, 2023).

32 The Index score ranges from 0 to 100 with 100 being the highest score of media freedom.

33 The score ranges from 0 to 100 with 0 being highly corrupt and 100 being very clean.

The right to protest is protected under Serbian law and the Constitution (Ustav Republike Srbije, 2006; Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 6/2016-37), but its implementation in practice remains partial. In recent years, cases of violence against protesters have been documented by the ruling party representatives, police, and other citizens (Latković, 2023, June 15). The Belgrade Center for Human Rights has reported incidents of violence against protesters, including verbal attacks by politicians, threats of job loss directed at activists, and excessive police responses during protests following allegations of election irregularities (Beogradski centar za ljudska prava, 2024).

Protests advocating for media freedom were organized in Serbia in 2023 following mass shootings in May. A series of 27 demonstrations, under the banner “Serbia Against Violence”, included demands such as revocation of the national broadcasting licences for TV Pink and TV Happy, as well as the resignation of the council of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) (Beogradski centar za ljudska prava, 2024). It is important to mention that the number of protests related to media freedom has been increasing in recent years (Beogradski centar za ljudska prava, 2024; 2023; 2022). This trend possibly suggests citizens’ demand for greater accountability, transparency, and democratic governance.

Table 11: DATA ON DEMOCRACY

<b>Democracy Index of the country in 2023</b>	6.3 <sup>34</sup>
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the Democracy Index of the country growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	Same - 6.3 (2023), 6.3 (2022), 6.4 (2021)
<b>What is the Rule of Law Index of the country in 2023? (according to the World Justice Project)</b>	0.48 <sup>35</sup>
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the Rule of Law Index of the country growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	Same - 0.48 (2023), 0.49 (2022), 0.49 (2021)
<b>Level of Corruption Perception Index for the country in 2023</b>	36 <sup>36</sup>
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Corruption Perceptions Index for the country is growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	Same - 36 (2023), 36 (2022), 38 (2021)

34 Index score ranges from 0 (least democratic) to 10 (most democratic).

35 Index score ranges from 0 to 1.

36 Score ranges from 0 to 100 (with 0 being highly corrupt and 100 being very clean).



<b>What is the Media Freedom Index in the country in 2023?</b>	59.16 <sup>37</sup>
<b>TREND in the past 3 years: Is the Media Freedom Index in the country is growing, declining, or remaining the same?</b>	Declining - 59.16 (2023), 61.51 (2022), 67.97 (2021)
<b>Is there transparency and open public access to data about the spending of public funds? YES/NO</b>	NO <sup>38</sup>
<b>The law on access to public information follows international standards. YES/NO</b>	YES <sup>39</sup>
<b>There is a functional and credible independent institution supervising implementation of the law on access to public information, including the administration of complaints regarding denied access. YES/NO</b>	YES <sup>40</sup>
<b>Were there, government or parliament members under prosecution for charges of corruption or other criminal charges in 2023? YES/NO</b>	NO <sup>41</sup>
<b>Does legislation allow political party ownership in the media in the country? YES/NO</b>	NO <sup>42</sup>
<b>Is there significant political party ownership (i.e. ownership of a group of media of the same or different types, or a media outlet with a large audience or market share or strong influence on public opinion) in the media in the country? YES/NO</b>	YES

37 Index score ranges from 0 to 100.

38 According to the Open Budget Index Score, Serbia is evaluated with a mark of 51 out of 100 which is not enough to indicate that a country is likely publishing enough material to support informed public debate on the budget (a score of at least 61). Transparency, defined in this research, supposes "public access to information on how the central government raises and spends public resources".

39 The Law is partly implemented in practice. Journalists and researchers state that institutions in Serbia don't always respond on request, with the Government being the leader in such practice. Fulfilment of these requests is around 74%.

40 The name of the institution is the Commissioner of Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection (<https://www.poverenik.rs/en/>).

41 There were no members of the government or parliament prosecuted for corruption or criminal charges in 2023. However, significant cases involving public officials were reported in 2023/24. For instance, the assistant mayor of Leskovac, Perica Gavrilović, was arrested for alleged misuse of public funds in the "atarski putevi" scandal. Additionally, in March 2023, Nenad Milanović, the chief of staff of the Belgrade mayor, was investigated for bribery, with formal charges filed in June 2024.

42 According to the Law on Electronic Media, a licence holder for the provision of media services cannot be a political party (Article 91).

## VII.

# CONCLUSIONS

Media freedom remains a critical issue tied to the rule of law in Serbia. Journalists face growing challenges that undermine their ability to report freely and independently. In addition to low socio-economic status and insufficient labour protections, they encounter significant political pressure. Threats to personal safety are also escalating, with journalists facing not only verbal and physical attacks but also surveillance and unauthorized access to personal data. These intrusions raise serious privacy and security concerns, fostering a climate of fear that hampers free reporting.

The media landscape in Serbia has seen an increase in the number of media outlets, particularly online platforms, reflecting a shift toward digital information sources. However, this increase does not translate to greater media freedom. Despite the proliferation of online media, television remains the dominant source of information and the most trusted media outlet.

Television remains the dominant medium in Serbia, but its central role is problematic due to high concentration of ownership in the broadcasting sector. This concentration has resulted in a polarized landscape, with pro-government channels holding national frequencies and dominating the narrative, while pro-opposition or professional cable channels are largely restricted to cable networks with limited reach. The imbalance hinders citizens' access to diverse perspectives and a balanced view of current events.

In that manner, media in Serbia face significant risks due to the concentration of ownership among a few companies and recent legislative changes allowing state-linked companies to own media outlets. These legal amendments enable the state to indirectly control media and exert substantial influence over media reporting.

The political control of mainstream media and the resulting biased reporting undermine democracy. International election monitoring bodies have consistently highlighted systemic issues that hinder fair elections, including media bias, the misuse of state resources, and pressure on public employees. Concerns about fair elections and editorial independence have sparked numerous citizen protests. A series of demonstrations, organized after mass shooting tragedies in 2023, highlighted public dissatisfaction with the ruling party's influence over the media. Key demands included reforms to the regulatory body and changes to the allocation of national broadcasting frequencies.

The challenges outlined above indicate that Serbia faces tremendous challenges in the areas of the rule of law, media freedom and democratic governance. Addressing these issues will require concerted efforts to strengthen journalist protections, promote media pluralism, and ensure that existing laws are effectively implemented in practice.

However, the positive changes recorded in recent years on Serbia's media scene should not be overlooked. The number of media outlets continues to grow, and new print media have been established despite the rapid rise in popularity of web portals. Several journalistic associations have initiated efforts to improve the journalism profession and working conditions. Separately, a new, revised, and updated ethical code for journalists in Serbia has also been adopted. Alongside these efforts, civil society organizations contribute by conducting various productive activities, such as journalist training, developing manuals and publicly highlighting problems that still need to be addressed. Despite difficult working conditions and threats to their safety and privacy— often originating from the authorities— different, albeit few, investigative editorial teams continue to perform their work ethically, contributing to fully informing citizens and breaking away from the one-sided narratives aligned with the state interests that dominate many other media outlets in Serbia.

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## MEDIA BIAS, LEGISLATIVE CHALLENGES, AND THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

### The Future of the Media in Serbia – Facts and Trends

This publication is the result of research undertaken as part of the project **“Our Media: A civil society action to generate media literacy and activism, counter polarisation and promote dialogue”**. The second research series was conducted in the thematic framework titled “The Future of the Media in the Western Balkans and Turkey”, focusing, in 2024, on collecting and analysing the facts and trends on media and democracy in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey.

The project **“Our Media: A civil society action to generate media literacy and activism, counter polarisation and promote dialogue”** is jointly implemented by nine media development organisations from the Western Balkans and Turkey with the financial support of the European Union. The coordinator of the three-year project is the Foundation Mediacentar Sarajevo. Partners in the project are the Albanian Media Institute in Tirana; Bianet in Istanbul; the Macedonian Institute for Media in Skopje; the Montenegro Media Institute in Podgorica; the Novi Sad School of Journalism; the Peace Institute in Ljubljana; the Press Council of Kosovo in Pristina; and the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media (SEENPM).