



South East European Network
for Professionalization of Media

MEDIA AS AN INSTRUMENT OF POWER AND CAPITAL

The Future of Media in Serbia – Considerations of Key Actors

Milica Janjatović Jovanović

OUR MEDIA:

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



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SUMMARY

The overall situation in the Serbian media landscape has been assessed as extremely poor. The media are not perceived as free, and public trust in them remains low. A limited number of journalists and independent outlets stand out as credible, having managed to uphold high professional standards through integrity and adherence to ethical principles. Citizens largely believe that their interests are insufficiently represented, perceiving the media instead as serving the interests of political power and capital.

The main shortcomings and key needs identified by citizens in relation to the functioning of the media and media content production include truthful reporting in the public interest; the facilitation of debate and dialogue on important social issues; coverage of culture and education; independence from political and economic pressures; and the expectation that the media act as a cohesive rather than a divisive force in society.

The principal causes of the shrinking space for media freedom have been identified as financial dependency, an unregulated market, political pressure, and the dysfunctionality of the regulatory system. Citizens perceive the media as a powerful instrument that “constructs reality” and shapes public opinion. A direct link has been observed between the erosion of media standards and the decline of democracy, as media are increasingly used to disseminate propaganda, create social divisions, target political opponents, and radicalize society.

In terms of media consumption habits, a well-established pattern specific to different social groups has been observed: younger audiences primarily obtain information through social media and online portals, while older citizens continue to rely heavily on television. The unstable socio-political situation in Serbia has affected both the ways in which citizens consume information and the models through which media content is distributed. Citizens increasingly turn to non-media sources, such as participants in or direct witnesses of ongoing protests and university blockades. At the same time, media outlets have adapted to audience needs by using social networks more intensively to communicate timely information about current events.

It is estimated that the media are facing multiple, interrelated challenges that will significantly influence future developments. The key challenges identified include financial sustainability, technological innovation, and dysfunctional institutional and regulatory mechanisms. The conclusion is

that the current funding models cannot ensure media independence. As an alternative, subscription- and donation-based models are proposed, though there is scepticism regarding their feasibility given the country's current socio-economic conditions.

The rapid expansion of social media and artificial intelligence has accelerated the flow of information and the spread of false or manipulative content, placing additional demands on the media to verify and analyse disinformation. The trend towards shorter media formats and the rise of independent and citizen journalism will inevitably require traditional media to adapt their formats in order to remain competitive. Under the given circumstances, the only viable path for the survival of professional journalism lies in strengthening and ensuring the effective functioning of regulatory mechanisms.

However, focus group discussions have confirmed earlier research findings that identified recurring patterns of abuse in the public funding of media outlets through state-run competitions, violations of media laws and codes that go unpunished, and the persistent political instrumentalization of the media. During this period of deep social crisis and pronounced media polarization, the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) has also ceased to function effectively, as the mandate of its Council expired on 4 November 2024, and a new one has not yet been appointed.

The general conclusion is that the key factors determining the survival of professional media in the future will be financial independence, technological adaptation, the functioning of democratic institutions, and the engagement of a wider range of actors in building collaborative media models. Such models should rely on a high degree of self-regulation, active citizen participation, and a consistent focus on quality journalism and complex social issues, which would also entail greater involvement of experts, scientists, and intellectuals in media content creation.

I.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents a qualitative analysis of data on the media landscape in Serbia, media usage patterns, public trust in the media, and the overall state of democracy, as published in the study *Media Bias, Legal Challenges and the Struggle for Freedom* (Sigeti & Koledin, 2025). In addition, it offers a synthetic analysis of opinions expressed by various social groups regarding the condition of the media and potential media trends in the future.

Previous research findings indicate that the media system in Serbia is formally supported by a relatively well-defined regulatory framework, which however is rarely implemented in practice. The work of professional media outlets is hindered by financial imbalances in the market, numerous cases of abuse, and persistent pressure—all of which have contributed to the public's low level of trust in the media. This is further supported by data showing a high concentration of media ownership in Serbia, particularly in the television sector, which remains the most consumed medium, with average daily viewership exceeding eight hours. The ruling structures have been observed to exert direct influence over media operations and editorial policies, including through the misuse of public funds allocated for media financing.

At the same time, only 30% of citizens express trust in the media overall, with the highest level of trust placed in television and the lowest in social media (Sigeti & Koledin, 2025). Through qualitative analysis, this study seeks to identify the underlying causes of these conditions in the media sector, as well as the observable consequences in journalistic practices, media consumption, and audience trust. Furthermore, the analysis aims to outline potential changes in media production, distribution, and consumption that may be expected in the future based on these trends.

It is important to note that this research has been conducted during a period of pronounced socio-political instability in Serbia. On 1 November 2024, a concrete canopy at the Novi Sad Railway Station—formally reopened by government officials only a few months earlier—collapsed, resulting in the deaths of 14 people, with two more succumbing to their injuries later. In the aftermath, citizens began holding peaceful commemorations for the victims, gathering in the streets every Friday and blocking traffic for 14 minutes as a symbolic act of remembrance. These gatherings gradually evolved into mass protests and university blockades following several attacks on citizens and students participating in the commemorations. The protests have since grown into the largest and longest-lasting demonstrations against the ruling regime

ever recorded in Serbia (Al Jazeera, 2025), continuing through the period in which this report is being prepared.

Protesters are demanding early elections (Andrić, 2025), while government representatives deny the need for them and accuse demonstrators of attempting to stage a “colour revolution” and of causing material damage to the state (B92, 2025). The arrests and detentions of politicians and activists over statements made during recorded private conversations (Sabljaković, 2025), the president’s pardons of individuals convicted of inflicting serious bodily harm on protesters (Zarević, 2025), allegations of illegal use of acoustic weapons against citizens during the large protest in Belgrade on 15 March 2025 (CRTA, 2025), and ongoing media propaganda and targeting of protest participants¹ (FakeNews Tragač, 2025) are among the key factors sustaining public mobilization and reinforcing demands for systemic change, with early elections identified as a necessary first step.

The exceptional polarization of Serbian society is clearly visible, and largely produced, through the media, which have openly taken sides during the current wave of social unrest (Veljanovski et al., 2025). The present socio-political context is therefore an essential factor in interpreting the results of this qualitative research and understanding the broader implications of media dynamics in Serbia today.

1.1. METHODOLOGY

The analysis was conducted on the basis of four focus group discussions² held during May and June 2025, involving a total of 28 participants. Two focus groups were organized with citizens from different age categories (18–35 and 36–65 years)³, one with media representatives and media experts⁴, and

1 According to research conducted by the portal FakeNews Tracer, the tabloids *Informer*, *Alo*, and *Novosti* published 5,773 manipulative news items about the protests and blockades in Serbia over a six-month period. “In numerous reports, protesters were labelled as terrorists, Nazis, fascists, Ustaše, violent extremists, and, in some cases, as opponents of the Serbian Orthodox Church, satanists, or even cannibals. The tabloids sought to delegitimize students and other organizers or supporters of the protests, downplay the number of participants, and portray the demonstrations as anti-Serbian” (Autonomija, 2025).

2 Details about the focus groups are presented in Annex 1, located at the end of this report.

3 The anonymity of citizen participants has been ensured by assigning each a unique code consisting of their gender, age, and place of residence.

4 The focus group with media representatives included five participants. Although a larger number of participants had initially confirmed their attendance, the prevailing socio-political circumstances prevented three female journalists from taking part. A new form of protest, introduced on 29 June 2025—one day before the scheduled focus group—consisted of blocking major streets and intersections. As a result, traffic in Belgrade was severely disrupted, and in some main streets and boulevards completely suspended, which made it impossible for the journalists who lived farther away to reach the venue on foot.

one with individuals possessing significant cultural and social capital and influence.

The average duration of the focus groups was 106 minutes. Discussions were conducted using a semi-structured interview format, guided by a set of pre-defined thematic areas. The two focus groups with citizens explored participants' personal experiences and perceptions of the media. The focus group with individuals holding substantial social and cultural capital provided analytical insights into the media landscape in Serbia, placing the issue within a broader socio-economic and political context and reflecting on global trends. The focus group with media representatives offered a qualitative perspective on data obtained from previously published research, as well as personal experiences and professional assessments of the current state of the media in Serbia and anticipated changes in the near future.

The research was carried out within the framework of the project *Our Media: A civil society action to generate media literacy and activism, counter polarisation and promote dialogue*, implemented with the financial support of the European Union by the partner organizations SEENPM, Albanian Media Institute, Kosovo Press Council, Macedonian Institute for Media, Novi Sad School of Journalism, Peace Institute, and bianet.

II.

ATTITUDES TOWARD MEDIA, JOURNALISM, AND DEMOCRACY

2.1. MEDIA AND THEIR ROLE IN DEMOCRACY

Across all focus groups, participants demonstrated a high level of understanding of what the media are, what their primary roles entail, and what constitutes professional journalism. They expect the media to provide truthful and timely information in the public interest, as well as to maintain impartiality in reporting. At the same time, participants are aware of the poor state of the media in Serbia. As one participant stated: “I would agree that the media should be objective and impartial. That sounds almost funny to me at this point.” (Woman, 52, Kragujevac) A high degree of unprofessionalism in the media was noted, along with the absence of reporting in the public interest and of truthful reporting in general: “Here, the media serve either the government or capital, not the public.” (Zoran Gavrilović, Sociologist and Media Researcher, Belgrade)

A high degree of unprofessionalism in the media was noted, along with the absence of reporting in the public interest and of truthful reporting in general.

All focus group participants confirmed that media outlets are not primarily guided by the interests of their audiences. One participant elaborated on the possible reasons for this: “The fact that the media present even verifiable facts differently, not just opinions, shows that they are driven by their own agendas, ideology, and money.” (Milica Lazić, Research Associate at the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, Novi Sad)

The process of narrowing the space for free and independent journalism was also recognized in every focus group. The two most frequently mentioned causes were financial dependency and political pressure: “Peripheral capitalism and political power are narrowing the space for media freedom. This doesn’t absolve the media of responsibility, but it certainly makes their position more difficult.” (Dražen Pavlica, Sociologist and Media Analyst, Belgrade)

When discussing possible funding models that could prevent pressure and abuse, financing through citizen subscriptions and donations emerged as the only model perceived as capable of ensuring reporting in the public

interest, though participants expressed strong scepticism about its feasibility under current circumstances in Serbia. The reasons cited included citizens' insufficient financial means to contribute regularly, as well as a lack of a broader culture of supporting the media in this way.

In both focus groups with citizens, participants also reflected critically on the role of the audience—specifically, the contribution of citizens themselves to the current state of the media. Citizens' responsibility was identified in their lack of financial support for professional media, as well as in their conscious choice to remain within informational “bubbles,” consuming content that reinforces their existing beliefs while disregarding the accuracy of information and the professionalism of sources: “We're talking about the media, but we're letting citizens off the hook—citizens who are lazy.” (Zoran Gavrilović, Sociologist and Media Researcher, Belgrade)

Although the idea of citizens existing in informational bubbles was widely accepted, several participants across different focus groups emphasized that the primary responsibility for media unprofessionalism should still be sought within centres of power, rather than among citizens. This view was best illustrated by one participant's statement:

I think the problem is that we're not putting pressure back on the government to do its job properly but instead letting it spill over onto citizens and civil society organizations, so that now we have to do everything, and I think that's a strawmen argument. (Woman, 32, Novi Sad)

Citizens recognize extraordinary power in the media: “The media construct our reality” (Manojlo Maravić, associate professor at the Academy of Arts, Novi Sad); “In the current situation in Serbia, the media are a socio-political construct and a very important one, because they are creators not only of information, but also of public opinion”. (Woman, 62, Kragujevac)

The absence of reporting in citizens' interests, of dialogue in the media, of debates on issues of general interest where different sides would be heard and opinions would clash (protests and blockades as the current main topic, the unresolved Kosovo issue, as well as capital projects, ecologically questionable state projects, etc.), and the constant dissemination of propaganda, creating “trenches”, declaring different social groups or entire nations as enemies, has, according to respondents, led to a changed value system among Serbian citizens. During the focus groups, concern was expressed about the increasingly pronounced divisions in society: “Society is torn apart along all structures.” (Dražan Pavlica, Sociologist and Media Analyst, Belgrade)

The state of the media in relation to the radicalization of society reminded certain participants of the period before the outbreak of the war in Yugoslavia. Several participants called propaganda-spreading media “media poisoning chambers”.

Citizens recognize these very “media poisoning chambers” as one of the reasons for the collapse of democracy in Serbia, while the second factor has been identified as the regime’s abuse of institutions:

In Serbia, we are witnessing a complete collapse of democracy, and this explains the state of the media. Without media freedom, there is no democracy, but without democracy, there is no media freedom either. I think this is all very interconnected and that the root of it all lies in the fact that we have an authoritarian regime in Serbia that relies heavily on media control and has developed very sophisticated methods of media control. (Nikola Burazer, European Western Balkans, Belgrade)

Today, on a daily basis, we have situations where several public officials, starting with the president of the state or the president of the Assembly, literally direct the most disgusting insults at certain journalists. I think this is truly frightening and that there is not even a ‘d’ for democracy in it. (Anonymous Journalist, online portal, Belgrade)

Among the focus groups, participants expressed general distrust in politicians, as well as doubt that democracy in Serbia was ever established and that such a state has always been reflected in the media landscape. Professor Rade Veljanovski, a respondent in the research, illustrated this with the following examples:

I must remind you that after the Fifth of October (the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević and the coming to power of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, author’s note), in the first few months there were two hundred and sixty accusations against journalists, two-thirds of which came from representatives of the new government that came after the Fifth of October. And I will also remind you that since we elected the first Council of the regulatory body, which was once the RRA—the Republic Broadcasting Agency, now the REM—we have never had six, meaning a two-thirds majority of Council members who can be said to be constructive, competent, and working in the public interest.

2.2. THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF JOURNALISTS

Although citizens believe that the media are not free, they single out individual journalists who, through moral integrity and professionalism, manage to

preserve certain spheres of freedom within the media sector and convey information of public interest to citizens. Participants recognized these individuals as the most vulnerable, as they deal with topics that touch centres of power and lack genuine protection, even though such protection exists in regulations and laws.

Citizens attribute great responsibility to journalists, as they are the ones who should select the most significant information and convey it objectively and impartially. One participant even emphasizes that this is “like performing a public function”. (Male, 54, Kragujevac) Nevertheless, participants do not perceive most journalists as free, nor do they believe that journalists today fulfil their role as conveyors of information of public significance in a comprehensive and objective manner. Rather, they recognize the logic of capital as a factor contributing to journalistic unprofessionalism:

The role of capital, especially in independent media, does not allow you to have journalists in the newsroom whose jobs are clearly divided anymore, where someone deals only with foreign policy, someone only with economics, someone only with culture. Journalists are, unfortunately, very often faced with the need to step into shoes they have never worn and break them in. (Dražen Pavlica, Sociologist and Media Analyst, Belgrade)

Participants also noted that journalists lack adequate education and familiarity with the topics they report on. Higher education, general awareness, professionalism, and moral integrity were identified as qualifications and characteristics that every journalist should possess, while the application of laws and the protection provided by journalists’ associations should ensure the safety of all media workers, particularly investigative journalists whose work questions centres of power.

Although there are individual journalists and outlets that are considered professional and trustworthy, such media (for example, N1 and Nova S) are nevertheless criticized for their advocacy approach. Their complete objectivity and pluralism are questioned due to the absence of representatives of the ruling parties as interlocutors. Research participants are aware that government representatives avoid and even target the mentioned media, yet they still assess that, in such cases, these outlets cannot be said to fully perform the function of professional media: “Critical media criticize, they try to have some control function, but they cannot have a pluralistic role, because the other side does not come. So, they can no longer fulfil the role they should have.” (Vujo Ilić, Political Scientist, Belgrade)

Addressing the same problem during the focus group with media professionals, Professor Veljanovski noted that, in such cases, credibility indicators should

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guide the evaluation of media content: “Everything that Vučić (the current president of Serbia, author’s note) says anywhere will also be published on N1, while everything that someone who is a critic of Vučić says will not be published in a proper manner in other media.”

It is precisely these credibility indicators that should form the basis for building audience trust in situations where external circumstances make it impossible to fully fulfil the media’s role.

During the focus group with citizens, there was also discussion about professional practices that should be changed. The lack of communication with audiences, as well the persistence of established topics, interlocutors, and analytical approaches, emerged as key criticisms. One respondent illustrated this as follows:

I think there is a perpetuation of similar people, as I see it, older journalists are somehow stuck in the same analyses and the same thinking, then they employ younger people who repeat what they say. And then I have the feeling that there is no refreshing of thought, no breadth of discussion, and so on. (Male, 33, Novi Sad)

The same respondent also made a significant observation about the selection of interlocutors in the media:

One thing I have encountered, and still encounter, is that with certain media I can assume which of two historians they will take as an interlocutor, or which sociologist. Then that journalist’s role becomes somewhat blurred (...) how impartial is the journalist if he calls a historian who will say what he wanted to say, only through that historian? I notice that, in general, there are quite a few actors, but a very small portion of them appear in, say, the most followed media on both sides. (Male, 33, Novi Sad)

It can be concluded that research respondents define the media in Serbia as an extremely powerful tool controlled either by those with political power or those who possess capital, and that citizens’ interests are largely neglected. Although certain media and journalists were highlighted as professional, the overall state of the media was assessed as extremely poor, with a clear causal-consequential relationship to the state of democracy and the broader emancipation of citizens and freedom of thought. These findings indicate that the perceptions of focus group participants—particularly those unfamiliar with previous research results—largely correspond to the already recorded state of media and democracy in Serbia.

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III.

CRITICAL REVIEW OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH FINDINGS

Media representatives discussed the most significant findings of the research *Media Bias, Legal Challenges and the Struggle for Freedom*. Indexes indicating a continuous decline in media freedom in Serbia are well-known and unsurprising to media professionals, given the actual poor state of the sector. However, indexes showing the state of democracy, perceptions of corruption, and the rule of law (all approximately mid-range values) came as a surprise to participants, whose impression is that the situation is significantly worse.

There are different interpretations of these differences between personal perception and numerical indicators. Journalist and political scientist Nikola Burazer, who himself occasionally contributes to the production of democracy indexes, believes that such metrics often fail to capture the real situation and tend to lag behind, “in the sense that only after two or three years do these indexes actually begin to show what we already see here as clear trends.” Professor Veljanovski interprets this data as evidence of the hybridity of society: “Our surprise that this data is not even worse confirms that we are a hybrid society that in principle has all freedoms—meaning the rule of law, including media freedom—but in reality this does not happen.”

Consequently, all participants agreed that the regime’s undemocratic behaviour directly affects the work of the media and journalists, restricting freedom of reporting, obstructing the work of professional media by withholding information and targeting journalists, while financially supporting media that disseminate propaganda:

I think that the fact that no journalist has been killed in the meantime does not mean that journalists are in a better position, because punishment for attacks, threats, pressures—whatever is happening to journalists—does not exist or is minimal, and I think this is one of the indicators of how bad the state’s relationship with journalists is. (Anonymous Journalist, online portal, Belgrade)

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Although media regulation reforms are formally implemented, such as the recent reform of media laws supported by Brussels (Insajder, 2025), the persistent failure to apply legal provisions in practice is, according to the respondents, further proof of the lack of political will to ensure a professional media environment in Serbia. This conclusion aligns with previous research findings that both institutions and media frequently fail to comply with the law and that such abuses go unpunished, including state subsidization of unprofessional media that speak favourably about government representatives (Janjatović Jovanović, 2023; Vučić, 2020).

In 2023, there were 2,592 media outlets in Serbia, most of which were online portals (1,113). The number of outlets has not changed significantly since, though BIRN journalist Aleksa Tešić notes many of these portals are inactive. His research indicates that Serbia has approximately 80 independent media, including online portals, many of which operate under extremely difficult conditions:

When I called some of those portal owners, they told me they work completely voluntarily. These are local independent media. Salaries are also miserably small. They only pay themselves and that's it. They often mention how many local businessmen are forbidden to advertise with them because they are virtually blackmailed that if they advertise and give money, they will lose, I don't know, something. (Aleksa Tešić, BIRN, Belgrade)

One of the fundamental problems identified is that there is no financing model that could guarantee media independence. Serbia also lacks a well-regulated market where media can compete with their programming; instead, outlets largely depend on state assistance: "We know that media financing comes largely from the state, both directly and indirectly through Telekom, enormous amounts of money come through there". (Nikola Burazer, European Western Balkans, Belgrade)

So, when the state gives directly from the budget, especially when you have such a low level of democracy, then what President Vučić said a month ago happens: that television is financed from barrels. He didn't explain who is financed from barrels and how, but the fact is that we have almost returned to a system of state financing that is prohibited by our current laws. (Rade Veljanovski, Professor Emeritus, Faculty of Political Sciences, Belgrade)

Given that television remains the most consumed medium in Serbia, that the market is unregulated, that broadcasters rely on state financial assistance—operating for months without effective oversight (the mandate of the Council of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media expired on 4 November 2024,

and a new one has yet to be appointed)—participants concluded that the situation is extremely poor. Television, they argue, is being used to spread political influence with impunity, as no mechanism currently exists to sanction media based on reported irregularities.

Participants also linked citizens' low levels of trust in the media precisely to this context: "I think their goal was not so much to convince people of one truth, but rather their goal was for people not to believe anyone or anything anymore". (Nikola Burazer, European Western Balkans, Belgrade)

By completely undermining the professionalism of much of the media, the authorities have fostered the perception that "all media are the same" and that no one should be trusted, further complicating the position of professional outlets.

Distrust is particularly pronounced among young people who neither follow the media nor take an interest in it:

Those people who are not knowledgeable about media, who don't follow it, especially young people, they really don't know the difference between what is good and what is not. They are convinced that everything is tabloid and that everything is bad and that it's all nonsense and that journalism is like that. (Anonymous Journalist, investigative portal, Belgrade)

Given the observed trends and the current socio-political climate, media professionals also offered their vision on possible transformations in the media field in the future. All respondents acknowledged the significant role of social networks and the internet in both in current and future developments. One respondent stated that the protests and events in Serbia in recent months had significantly influenced her outlets approach to disseminating information, forcing it to rely more heavily on social networks. Nevertheless, journalistic standards and adherence to the Code remain essential characteristics of professional media, regardless of the communication channel (Anonymous Journalist, online portal, Belgrade).

Journalist Aleksa Tešić views precisely this transformation towards online communication channels as a reason for optimism, arguing that these spaces can bring greater freedom to the media: "The audience will be renewed, and people will be more engaged—I mean on social networks where the space is realistically much freer. Social networks are realistically free, unless Elon Musk or someone else shuts them down."

In contrast, Professor Veljanovski believes that the focus should remain on media professionalism and the improvement of "basic things" in the media

field, as the online sphere lacks editorial policy and genuine freedom: “In that sphere, various interests can also work in different ways. Therefore, we cannot expect that through those media we will indirectly improve our communication environment.”

If current trends in media in Serbia continue, respondents believe that a further collapse of professional media can be expected, accompanied by staff reductions and declining content quality, with journalists moving to the online sphere.

IV.

MEDIA USE AND TRUST

The media use of focus group participants reflects the data obtained through quantitative research. Younger participants primarily obtain information through local online portals and social networks, mostly do not watch television, and even emphasize that they do not own a television. Older participants, meanwhile, state that they still watch television intensively, along with using social networks. Respondents do not habitually pay for media content; they mention buying local newspapers more as a family tradition than as a means of obtaining information. One participant mentioned buying the *LiceUlice* magazine for humanitarian reasons, as part of the proceeds go to socially vulnerable people, not because of the magazine's content itself. In both focus groups with citizens, it was emphasized that the satirical show *24 Minutes with Zoran Kesić* is occasionally used as a review of the most significant information for the past week, since everything that was news is presented in an entertaining way and with a critical perspective.

The fact that actors in social events no longer need the media to communicate and transmit information inevitably has consequences for both the media and the audience.

A new trend that citizens have noticed in recent months is the rise of citizen journalism. This trend is a consequence of the current socio-political situation, university blockades, protests, and the general involvement of citizens in political processes in the country. Universities, as organizers of protests and blockades, communicate information through social media channels, from where media outlets pick them up. In addition, these channels also serve for urgent announcements, quick changes in protest organization (such as changes of location or suspension of actions). At the same time, citizens participating in protests document and livestream incidents and current events. The fact that actors in social events no longer need the media to communicate and transmit information inevitably has consequences for both the media and the audience. Some participants in the citizens' focus group stated that this development had made it easier for them to follow the situation and actively engage in events. However, they also recognize that the sources of information they follow are not media outlets, that they are not bound by journalistic standards, and that there is a risk of abuse. Although respondents perceive the internet and social networks as freer communicative and informational spaces, they are aware that these are also areas with significant limitations dictated by capital:

The internet very quickly turned into a kind of consumer mecca in a space that actually favours consumerism and constantly feeds it and constantly supports it, and I think democracy there has also become something like a commodity, a commodified value that is waved at

us as, well, some kind of possibility, an illusion of choice. (Vladislava Gordić Petković, Full Professor at the Department of English Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, Novi Sad)

Certain journalists have noticed that their organic content reach is continuously decreasing unless they pay for advertising, while citizens notice a selective presentation of content assigned to them by algorithms. Nevertheless, compared with traditional media, respondents give priority to the internet as the medium of the future. However, the amount of information that online platforms bring to citizens on a daily basis requires caution and the responsibility of each individual to find adequate models of content consumption that meet their communicative needs, while simultaneously avoiding information overload, which inevitably leads to a reduced capacity for critical assessment of quality and credibility. Thus, citizens state that even in the online sphere they choose individuals and platforms to follow and trust to some degree, while often relying on recommendations from acquaintances and friends whose opinions they value:

For example, some friend of mine who I know is okay tells me something, read this or posts some news on Instagram or Facebook, then maybe I can take that into account. But media as media, essentially I don't commit to anyone absolutely. (Male, 39, Kragujevac)

Focus group participants' trust in media is low; media are generally not trusted, because along with media, institutions and bodies that control media work have also lost credibility. Participants who expressed views on different levels of media quality nevertheless trust outlets they consider professional, as well as individual journalists, while maintaining a certain degree of scepticism. An anonymous journalist from an online portal in Belgrade stated that it is precisely the role of journalists to maintain media credibility in order to maintain audience trust:

I think now when we're talking as media professionals or journalists, there is a very big responsibility on us to maintain credibility as media workers, because I, for example, when I look as a citizen, if an article was published by Krik or BIRN or CINS, I really absolutely believe in it, because I know what kind of journalists they are and I know that they didn't put a single word there that they can't prove.

Younger research participants recognized older citizens, especially those who primarily watch television, as a risk group susceptible to media manipulation. One participant described an encounter with residents of a small town who have a uniform opinion about students blocking universities—a consequence of exposure to specific media content:

Focus group participants' trust in media is low; media are generally not trusted, because along with media, institutions and bodies that control media work have also lost credibility.

I was recently in a village where people only have a few channels. And they all criticize current events, they say students are Nazis. People really say that and I couldn't believe it, but they only have one channel and they don't see the other side. (Female, 36, Kragujevac)

Although they testified that trust in media is low, respondents recognize that the most used media nevertheless have the power to shape attitudes, and as a solution most often cited better education and media literacy of citizens.

Significant insight into citizens' trust in media and the possibilities of influencing attitudes was provided by psychologist and research respondent Milica Lazić:

Attitudes are very difficult to change and usually a large number of attitudes go together; they are parts of a structure, and that's why we have such a divided society. And once people have developed attitudes, they can have N1 (a television critical of the government in Serbia, author's note) and watch it every day and argue with the television and nothing will change. Attitudes change much earlier, or rather are built much earlier, and there is much more room to do something there than to talk about people who are already formed and who will, regardless of the content presented to them, believe their cognitive biases, confirm that they are right, and then use various mechanisms to say what interest this person on television has to tell them this now—who is paid, by which sources, who is a foreign mercenary, who is Soros's, and so on.

Bearing in mind the poor quality of media content (with rare examples of professional media and journalists) and the dysfunctional regulatory system, we can conclude that, in addition to media consumption and building quality media habits, citizens are also burdened with the obligation of substantial control of media content. Given that most citizens—research participants included—do not actively follow the media, but rather do this “in passing”, it can be expected that media will continue to nurture citizens' cognitive biases in the future for the sake of promoting particular interests. This situation can only be changed by establishing a functional regulatory system that monitors and maintains high professional standards in the media.

V.

CITIZENS' NEEDS AND DEMANDS

Citizens believe that the most consumed media in Serbia do not meet citizens' communicative and informational needs, primarily because they fail to report in the public interest. There is no confrontation of opinions on important social issues aimed at finding solutions that serve the majority of citizens:

You have no public debate here even on the topic of, say, Kosovo, which is so important and big if you ask citizens. On the other hand, when was the last time you saw any debate about the government's economic policies, about what the government and opposition propose in terms of economic reforms? (Nikola Burazer, European Western Balkans, Belgrade)

Besides the absence of debate on significant social issues, participants also highlighted the lack of dialogue, which although similar in form, differs fundamentally in content and purpose:

We have debate to some extent, but no dialogue. Debate implies polemics, in the sense that we outshout someone in public space, and questions of truth and values become secondary. What matters to me that there is dialogue—that people meet, exchange values and principles, and try to find some alchemical formula that will help us live in a relatively organized and humane society. (Dražan Pavlica, Sociologist and Media Analyst, Belgrade)

Younger research participants emphasized that they expect the media to become a cohesive force in society: "Now we have an example where the community has started to network, and media should act as intermediaries between those smaller communities, networking people." (Male, 20, Novi Sad)

Respondents also stated that they do not communicate with the media. Only a few engage through public comments, and even those who have occasionally tried to request information or suggest topics said that they usually received no response. Based on this, citizens recommended that media outlets encourage audience interaction and actively listen to public needs, as community building may be key to the survival of quality media.

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Respondents repeatedly emphasized that they lack the time to search for diverse information themselves and therefore expect the media to provide such variety. They identified content related to culture, education, and children's programming as most lacking.

One segment of the focus group with citizens with high cultural and social capital and influence focused on the absence of culture in the media. Respondents highlighted the importance of this type of programming not for elitist reasons, but because of the role culture plays in formulating society's value system: "Culture is a set of the highest human values, from time immemorial to today. I simply think that culture is a battlefield where certain types of hegemony and domination of different ideas are realized". (Manojlo Maravić, Associate Professor at the Academy of Arts, Novi Sad)

It is precisely in this context that media insistence on reality formats promoting criminals and various forms of socially unacceptable behaviour should be interpreted: "They're not just selling you spectacles as spectacles—their mutual relations, quarrels, fights—but a value system." (Manojlo Maravić, Associate Professor at the Academy of Arts, Novi Sad)

Such programming, beyond being financially profitable, also undermines the emancipatory potential of citizens. For this reason, the audience's insistence on quality media content is particularly important, as low-quality programming rest on both financial and ideological foundations.

Conversely, Zoran Gavrilović, a research participant and media researcher himself, pointed out that audience preferences expressed in media research often do not match actual viewership patterns:

When you look at Insajder television's programming and then at audience research, it's an ideally organized broadcaster. But its ratings haven't increased since its founding, which means one of two things: either researchers don't know how to conduct research, or audiences are lying. Why do I say this? Because audiences claim they want culture, education, and information. When you look at the most-watched stations, there's none of that there.

The complexity of the relationship between media, audiences, and content thus reflects multiple, interrelated factors. Although audiences often choose simpler content of lower quality, the constant supply of such content gradually erodes awareness of, and demand for, higher-quality programming. Meanwhile, the logic of capital—which prioritizes profitability—encourages the cultivation of audiences with lower expectations, aligning quality with production cost. In this sense, we speak of audience exploitation, whose emancipatory potential is systematically undermined.

Therefore, all actors interested in improving media content and strengthening democratic processes must consider citizens' expressed needs, especially regarding culture and education. At the same time, it is essential to promote media literacy among citizens, both through formal education and through informal training across various social groups.

VI.

THE FUTURE OF MEDIA

Research participants assess that the media face numerous challenges in the future, with multiple factors influencing the survival of professional journalism. The main challenges identified during focus groups were financial sustainability, the expansion of social networks and artificial intelligence, and the dysfunctionality of democratic mechanisms and institutions responsible for media regulation and oversight.

6.1. FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY OF MEDIA OUTLETS

Financial sustainability and autonomy are recognized as the fundamental guarantees of media freedom and prerequisites for quality media content. Respondents acknowledged that it is impossible to maintain or improve content quality while media remain dependent on current financing models:

It should be kept in mind that the number of media worldwide is growing every day. Yes, as much as the number of media outlets grows, the total money allocated to the media does not grow. What does this inevitably lead to? A decline in quality. (Rade Veljanovski, Professor Emeritus, Faculty of Political Sciences, Belgrade)

In Serbia, the situation is further complicated by an inadequately regulated market and the state's financial influence on media operations.

It has already been noted that respondents proposed several alternative models to improve sustainability—such as audiences paying for quality content, which would encourage professionalism since quality itself would guarantee survival. However, they also warned that this model could limit access to information for those unable to pay: “My only concern here is the accessibility of information. Does this mean that only people who pay will have access to certain information? That’s very concerning to me in our social context, because we are largely poor.” (Female, 32, Novi Sad)

Other proposals for future media financing models included creating public media funds to which citizens could voluntarily contribute, with content remaining freely available to all, or allowing individuals to redirect a percentage of their taxes to media outlets they consider professional.

The main challenges identified during focus groups were financial sustainability, the expansion of social networks and artificial intelligence, and the dysfunctionality of democratic mechanisms and institutions responsible for media regulation and oversight.

6.2. EXPANSION OF SOCIAL NETWORKS AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The rise of social networks and artificial intelligence has created multiple challenges for media organizations. Traditional outlets cannot match the speed of information flow on social networks, even when using similar formats. Verification, contextualization, and confirmation of information are all time-consuming processes that independent online users are not required to respect. As a result, the spread of disinformation has become one of the central problems for professional media, who must now also engage in fact-checking and analysis of false information circulating rapidly online.

Current changes affect not only media but also audience behaviour. Respondents pointed out that audiences increasingly prefer shorter, more visual, and interactive content. The condensation of complex ideas into simplified media formats, (such as edutainment or theorytainment) can, however, compromise depth and understanding: “I receive seminar papers with references to YouTubers who make digest versions of McLuhan, Lacan, Baudrillard...” (Manojlo Maravić, Associate Professor at the Academy of Arts, Novi Sad)

This brings the risk of declining quality in both information and education, as in-depth examination of ideas and comparison of concepts is absent in such cases.

Respondents stated that even as media adapt to new forms of distribution and shorter production times, it remains crucial to uphold the core principles of media professionalism—accuracy, objectivity, public interest, and pluralism is essential.

If supported by a solid regulatory framework, technological advancement could help transform media into spaces of greater freedom, creativity, and audience participation. As technical segments of content production become simpler, more time can be devoted to improving content quality, respondents concluded.

Respondents also recognized the work of independent online productions by individual journalists as a growing existing trend with significant reach: “In the online sphere, individuals or certain groups will dominate more than professional media that have merely migrated to social networks”. (Anonymous Journalist, investigative portal, Belgrade)

Citizen journalism, made possible by modern technologies and increasingly visible during the 2024–2025 protests in Serbia, was also identified as a potential driver of democratization—if properly regulated:

If supported by a solid regulatory framework, technological advancement could help transform media into spaces of greater freedom, creativity, and audience participation.

We can definitely see a rise in different stories and people taking matters into their own hands, reporting, whether it is journalistic or not. They actually help us stay informed, and I think many people today get their information through social networks, and this will definitely develop more in the future, and they can even be freer on social networks than they are otherwise. (Female, 25, Zrenjanin)

6.3. DYSFUNCTIONALITY OF DEMOCRATIC MECHANISMS AND INSTITUTIONS RESPONSIBLE FOR MEDIA OVERSIGHT AND IMPROVEMENT

Across all focus groups, participants expressed the conviction that under current political and economic conditions, the situation in the media sector will only worsen. The capitalist logic of cost-cutting, staff downsizing, and quality degradation threatens journalism worldwide, while in Serbia, persistent political pressures could lead to the complete collapse of professional local media.

Given that local media were recognized during discussions as key channels for decentralization and civic networking, this decline represents a serious threat not only to the media landscape but also to democratic potential at the local level. If political pressure on major media houses continues, participants warned, Serbia may see the complete deprofessionalization of journalism:

If current trends continue, whether under this government or a new one, but with the same kind of attitude towards media, I think we are heading towards an almost complete collapse—towards the dominance of media outlets created by individuals or groups that perform media-like functions, but without standards and principles, driven only by clicks and views. This is a global problem. In developed democracies, governments may develop policies to protect at least some media that serve the public interest. But in countries like ours, I doubt this will happen, or at least not in that way. (Nikola Burazer, European Western Balkans, Belgrade)

6.4. SURVIVAL OF PROFESSIONAL MEDIA

In addition to analysing challenges for the media in the future, trends and opportunities that could contribute to the survival of professional media were examined. An anonymous journalist from an online portal in Belgrade, whose organization conducts courses for young journalists, pointed out that young people themselves represent potential for preserving professionalism:

Year after year we have stronger and stronger generations, and truly young people are coming who are so passionate, who so much want to do this job properly, who so much want to inform in the public interest, to investigate, to move forward... we really have a large number of young people who will sustain this profession, along with those of us who are already striving to uphold it, and I think media will not simply falter now under all this pressure.

Many also envisioned the future of journalism in collaborative and participatory models of media production.

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I don't know if I'm an optimist, but I think about Wikipedia—it doesn't have a major regulator, yet its standards are actually much higher because of self-regulation and collective participation. If I imagine an ideal medium, it's a collaborative one, where people work continuously on stories, on news, produce content and check one other. That's where I see a moment of liberation. (Vujo Ilić, Political Scientist, Belgrade)

The success of such a model, as well as broader professional progress, depends heavily on the involvement of experts and intellectuals in media production. Their engagement is crucial not only in communicating their own achievements and ideas but also in interpreting specialized and current socio-economic and political topics. Expert contributions remain limited if confined within the narrow professional community; thus, the media must prepare more thoroughly for such conversations—by researching topics, asking informed questions, and understanding how experts can enrich public understanding. In this context, it is significant that media also recognize that complex, scientific topics can be discussed in an accessible manner:

The recommendation for the media is not to fear difficult content, that is, not to divide content into difficult and easy, hermetic and communicative. The tradition of RTS in educational programming has shown that one can speak about both mathematics and mythology in equally accessible ways. (Vladislava Gordić Petković, Full Professor, Department of English Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, Novi Sad)

In conclusion, while the media will inevitably transform due to technological progress, participants argued that journalistic integrity and ethical principles must remain constant. Technical innovations will continue to shorten production processes, but content must still adhere to fundamental standards. With the help of technology, the future of media could bring greater citizen participation, creativity, and collaborative production, paving the way for a more democratic and informed public sphere.

VII.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Qualitative research on the state of the media in Serbia and potential future media trends has shown that the attitudes of citizens and media professionals largely align with findings from previous quantitative studies. The current socio-political crisis has further exposed the fragility of the media landscape, characterized deep media and societal polarization, political pressure on editorial policies of both commercial outlets and public broadcasters, and media campaigns targeting citizens involved in recent protests and blockades. At the same time, these events have driven citizens increasingly towards alternative sources of information—primarily social networks and online communication platforms—which has, in turn, prompted many media outlets to make greater use of these channels to reach audiences.

A continuous decline in professional standards in media reporting has been observed, largely resulting from political pressures that have brought about the near-total collapse of regulatory mechanisms and established democratic practices designed to ensure quality reporting in the public interest. Citizens now identify only a handful of journalists and media outlets as credible sources. The absence of a functioning market, the state's financial interventions, and the logic of profit maximization have been recognized as serious risks to the survival of professional media and journalism in Serbia.

Although citizens consistently express a preference for quality programming—particularly content covering culture, science, education, and public-interest topics—these are precisely the areas most lacking in the domestic media. Political influence, cost-cutting logic, and entrenched audience habits have led to the mass production of low-quality content, typified by reality shows as the main form of entertainment, political propaganda replacing public debate and dialogue, and an almost complete absence of programming with emancipatory potential for citizens.

Conversely, technological innovations, while posing significant challenges for the media—especially in relation to disinformation and the speed of content distribution—have simultaneously opened up opportunities for the development of new, collaborative media models with a high degree of self-regulation.

Whether the media of the future become spaces for deliberation or tools for passivization and deception will depend on multiple factors—social, economic, and political. The current state of the Serbian media offers few signs of movement towards greater professionalism and deliberation. However, the growing civic engagement in recent protests and blockades suggests increasing dissatisfaction with political situation and the state of media. Citizens who recognize media abuses and demand change have the potential to be the catalyst for the emergence of a more professional media landscape in the future.

Citizens who recognize media abuses and demand change have the potential to be the catalyst for the emergence of a more professional media landscape in the future.

Throughout all the focus groups, participants discussed the necessity for improving the media environment. Their recommendations are summarized below.

Recommendations:

- The Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) should develop a comprehensive strategy and guidelines for the development of the broadcasting system.
- Media outlets and the REM should promote pluralism of opinion, debate, and a culture of dialogue, ensuring that voices across the political spectrum are heard, while sanctioning hate speech, targeting, and labelling of political dissenters.
- Media researchers should continue to document and analyse violations of laws, regulations, and professional standards in order to enable evidence-based improvements in media practice.
- Media organizations should inform the public about the rights and roles of politicians, raising awareness among the public about how political influence is exerted through systemic abuse and excessive media exposure.
- Journalists should uphold the credibility of both traditional and online media through consistent professionalism, thereby maintaining public trust.
- Media outlets should report in the public interest, ensuring that citizens are timely and accurately informed about issues of general significance, and helping to prevent polarization and radicalization of society through the dissemination of propaganda.
- Media organizations should enhance content quality by covering topics from culture, the arts, science, and education, thereby achieving greater diversity in subjects and formats and addressing citizens' interests.

- Media outlets should establish effective models of communication with their audiences, including proactive approaches such as calls for contributions, feedback mechanisms, and regular assessments of citizen needs.
- Media, journalists, and institutions should respect existing laws to avoid political pressure, sanction unprofessional media reporting, and ensure the public's right to accurate and reliable information.
- Media associations should work to develop sustainable financing models that guarantee editorial independence and autonomy.
- Media organizations, institutions, and civil society should raise public awareness of the importance of professional media survival by organizing campaigns, expert public discussions, and public forums.
- Educational institutions, media, and civil society organizations should collaborate on improving media literacy among citizens, thereby creating an additional mechanism for ensuring content quality.
- Intellectuals, scientists, artists, and other citizens with significant cultural and social capital and influence should have greater media presence, in order to advance dialogue on significant social issues and make scientific and artistic achievements more accessible to the public.

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Annex 1
Description of Focus Groups

Focus group 1, 20 May 2025, Novi Sad
 Participants: citizens aged 18 to 35 years
 Number of participants: 8

Focus group 2, 13 June 2025, Kragujevac
 Participants: citizens aged 36 to 65 years
 Number of participants: 9

Table 1: DATA ON FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS WITH CITIZENS

City and age group	Date	Gender ratio M-F	Level of political engagement	Education level	Average age	Media habits
Novi Sad, 18–35 years	20 May 2025	5-3	Most participants always vote in elections, often or occasionally participate in protests and sign petitions, while half of the participants are formally active through associations/parties/movements	Postgraduate studies – 2 University degree – 5 High school – 1	25.6	Online portals and social networks, less frequently television and newspapers
Kragujevac, 36–65 years	13 June 2025	2-7	All participants regularly vote in elections, most at least occasionally participate in protests and sign petitions, while a minority of participants are active in parties, movements, or NGOs	University degree – 8 High school – 1	50.7	Television, social networks and online portals

Focus group 3, 26 May 2025, Novi Sad

Participants: Citizens with high cultural and social capital and influence

List of participants:

Zoran Gavrilović, Sociologist, Media Researcher and Executive Director of the Bureau for Social Research

Dražan Pavlica, Sociologist and Media Analyst
Vladislava Gordić Petković, Full Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad at the Department of English Studies and Literary Critic

Manojlo Maravić, Associate Professor at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad, Lecturer in the field of media theory, mass communication and video games

Vujo Ilić, Political Scientist and Research Associate and Assistant Director at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory of the University of Belgrade

Milica Lazić, Research Associate at the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad

Focus group 4, 30 June 2025, Belgrade

Participants: media professionals

List of participants:

Aleksa Tešić, Journalist at investigative portal BIRN, Belgrade

Nikola Burazer, Political Scientist and Journalist at the portal European Western Balkans, Belgrade

Rade Veljanovski, retired Full Professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade at the Department of Journalism and Communication Studies, former journalist and editor, as well as one of the founders of the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia

Anonymous Journalist, online portal, Belgrade

Anonymous Journalist, investigative portal, Belgrade

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Milica Janjatović Jovanović (born 1988) has been working as a media researcher and educator at the Novi Sad School of Journalism since 2018. She is a doctoral candidate in Interdisciplinary Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad.

MEDIA AS AN INSTRUMENT OF POWER AND CAPITAL

The Future of the Media in Serbia – Considerations of Key Actors

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 polarization and promote dialogue.”** The second research cycle was conducted in the thematic framework titled **“The Future of the Media in the Western Balkans and Turkey”** in 2025 and focused on analysing the views and opinions of media professionals regarding the current situation and trends in 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 polarization and promote dialogue”** is jointly implemented by nine media development organizations 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).