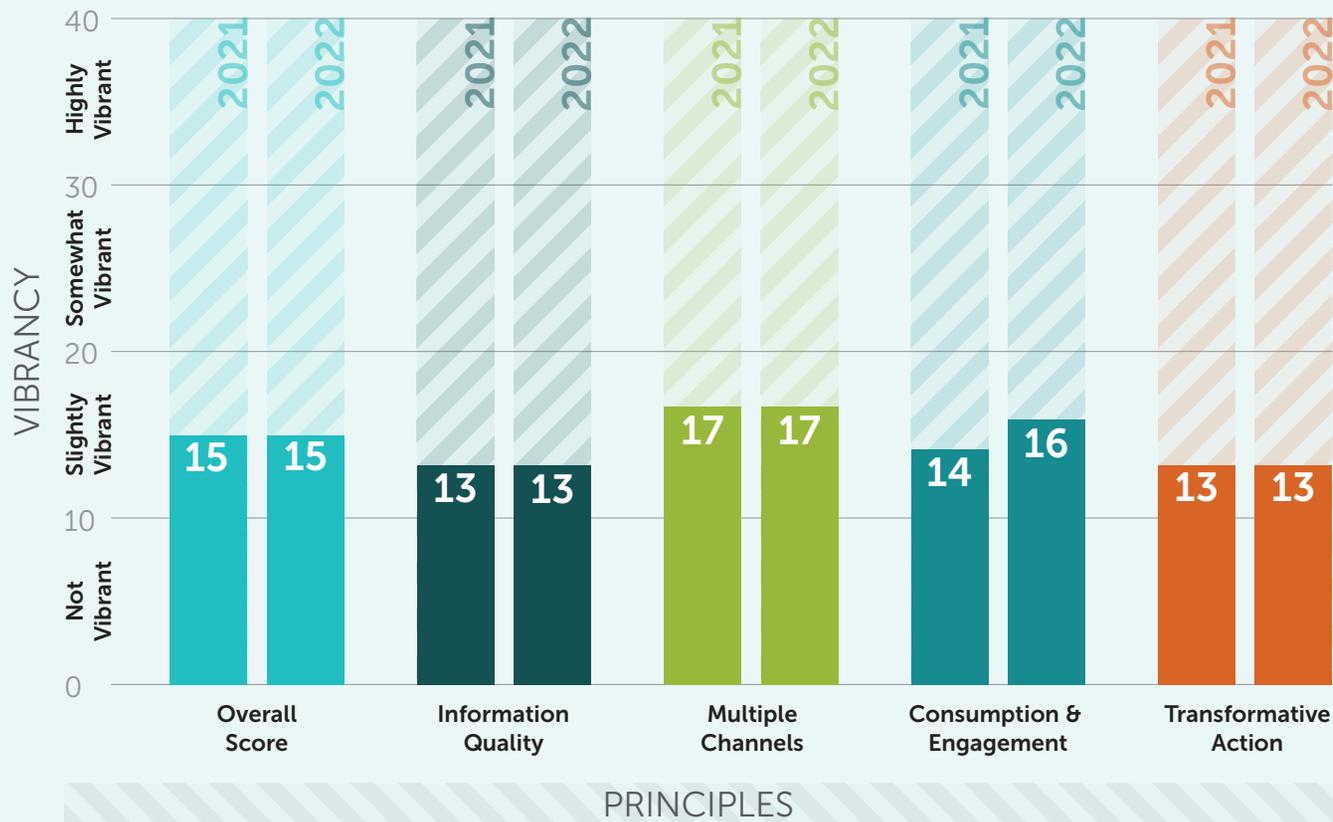


SERBIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

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

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

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

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

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

15

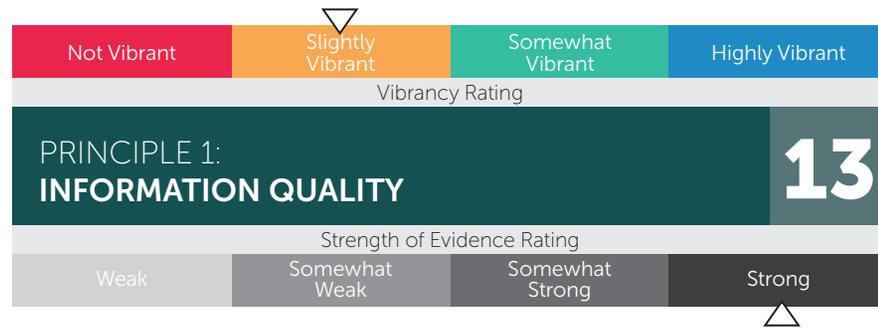
Serbian democracy and rule of law deteriorated further in 2021. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance reports that Serbia, one of 10 countries with the biggest democratic decline, is no longer in the democracy category but is rather a hybrid regime. In September, [Exit News](#) reported that Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić described the EU’s insistence on strong democratic institutions as the “jihad of the rule of law.” Despite this backslide, the European Commission has decided to open a new cluster in accession negotiations with Serbia.

During the pandemic, the V-Dem Institute has reported that violations of democratic freedoms were recorded at three times higher than the European average. Citizen dissatisfaction flared when thousands of citizens participated in environmental protests in over 50 cities against a Rio Tinto mining project and new legislation on expropriation and referendum. The upheaval came after a protest on November 28 in Šabac, where a group of men attacked protesters with hammers and sticks. The footage of this event has provoked sharp reactions from citizens.

The 2021 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index shows that Serbia has fallen from 54 in 2014 to 93 (out of 180) in 2020, confirming the long-term trend of media freedom deterioration. According to the Balkan Free Media Initiative’s *The Invisible Hand of Media Censorship in the Balkans*, there is growing evidence of state entities being used strategically to strengthen government control and government-backed media. Twitter is marking each pro-government media post with the following tag: “a media that cooperates with the government of Serbia.” Journalists who criticize the government are exposed to harassment, threats,

violence, and intimidation. Numerous pressures have led to a brutal campaign against the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK), an independent investigative center.

The 2021 VIBE overall score is the same as the previous year’s study—15. Most panelists were surprised the score is not lower because they consider 2021 the worst year for freedom and independence of Serbian media. Several things have prevented this: a small number of independent and investigative media have made a breakthrough to the public despite heavy repression from authorities and pro-government media; cooperation with civil society organizations (CSOs) and people’s initiatives on ecology and other social problems has extended dramatically; women journalists have made further professional progress and won almost all the domestic and international awards for Serbian journalists; and the information on the media’s environment has been improved by research. However, higher scores in those areas are offset by low scores in others: independence of information channels, media literacy, individuals’ use of quality information to inform their actions, the government’s use of quality information to make public policy decisions, and information’s support of good governance and democratic rights.



Numerous media and social networks exist, and nearly all topics are more or less represented. However, quality content based on professional and ethical standards is lacking. This principle is one of two principles tied with the low score of the Serbia study. Two indicators in this principle—on information is not intended to harm and on content production is sufficiently resources—received the lowest scores.

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

In Serbia, there is an infrastructure for various content production. Additionally, there are training opportunities for journalists, primarily through non-governmental programs, public and private faculties for journalism, and production professions, as well as informal trainings. However, allocating time for training means fewer people in the newsroom. Investigative journalists have received many international and domestic awards for their coverage and for practicing ethical journalism. However, a large part of the media uses unethical means and violates the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics several hundred times a year, and the reach of these media is far greater. "There is no diversity in reporting, especially on local topics," said Vesna Radojević, a project manager for KRIK.

Most Serbian media, including national television stations and public service media, do not provide citizens with the relevant information they need to better understand the sociopolitical context. Moreover, the most popular dailies are a never-ending source of fake news and manipulative

content. There are a dozen media outlets in the country that respect the principles of impartial and professional reporting. "It is new that tabloids have bypassed the typical antiscientific, sensationalist manner they nurtured in the previous year's reporting on vaccination, but it is primarily a reflection of government-friendly editorial policies," said Stefan Janjić, editor-in-chief of FakeNews Tragač.

Tabloid editors and journalists do not respect professional and ethical standards, claiming that such behavior is not sanctioned. In February, President Vučić and Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin showed explicit photos of mutilated bodies on a show broadcast on 13 television stations, initiating no reaction from the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) despite the identity protection regulation. "Consequences for nonprofessional journalism practices have been reduced to a minimum," said Milivoje Mihajlović, assistant general manager at the public service media RTS.

While there are professional media that adhere to ethical standards, they do not have the financial capacity for market research to improve their reach and audience engagement. Journalists are not specialists on a number of critical issues, and the number of sector experts is declining. For example, research from the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS) shows that newsrooms are lacking journalists with knowledge of the judiciary, and the quality of information presented on that topic is low, especially in local areas. "The journalism profession in Serbia is deteriorating due to financial reasons and pressures, causing quality to fall in specific topics," said Tamara Filipović Stevanović, the general secretary of IJAS.

There are no obstacles for Serbians to receive international news content. "The variety of topics is ensured, as we have specialized portals," said Bojan Cvejić, the executive director of *Danas*. A Serbian website, Nova.rs, won the traditional Smartocto competition for the best Balkan news portal for the first time. In addition to Nova, two other portals from Serbia are among the top five: N1.rs and *Danas.rs*. It is evident that a significant improvement in the quality of news websites is occurring.

Most media work under direct or indirect government control and therefore produce content that does not meet professional standards with no professional ramifications, as regulatory bodies are also politically controlled. “Independent editors are the exception rather than the rule. The editors of tabloids and tabloid television [channels] directly conduct government campaigns, targeting dissidents and independent media on a daily basis,” said Siniša Isakov, a professor of media technology. Dragan Petković, co-owner and project director at *Južne vesti*, said, “The vast majority of media, including public service [media], are under the direct control of one political option. The quality of information is not a priority—only their propaganda role is. A small number of media, especially local ones, have credible content.”

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

“The state infrastructure for producing decent media content exists, but at the same time the state intentionally prevents equal use of the infrastructure, and as a consequence the differences [among] individual media are huge,” said Tamara Skrozza, a journalist and Press Council Complaints Commission member.

As [reported](#) by Beta News Agency, authorities use spin and manipulation almost every day, and the tabloid media follow them. REM which should react to inappropriate content in electronic media, does not respond. While a small part of the media sector tries to adhere to professional standards, false news is created intentionally, deliberately, and in a very organized way with two main goals: to mislead the public for government gain and to discredit political opponents.

An analysis by the Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI) of media appearances in nationwide television appearances by government ministries shows that all contained advertising and propaganda and presented the government in a positive light. BIRODI has warned that these results prove that the constitutional guarantees of the right of

citizens to have objective, complete, timely, and truthful information is “greatly endangered” because citizens receive propaganda without a critical point of view.

Some tabloids are promoting pseudoscience and disinformation regarding COVID-19, although some are less active in doing so than they were in the first year of the pandemic. Moreover, several national television stations have hosted quasi-specialists on the matter. Panelists agreed that Happy TV is leads in advocating antivaccination attitudes. However, the main source of disinformation on COVID-19 are not the media but social networks. As evidenced by Serbia’s low COVID-19 vaccination rate, a large segment of the country’s citizens make decisions based on their emotions and beliefs.

Misinformation and fake news are an endemic and a ubiquitous part of Serbian politics. “The greatest amount of misinformation actually comes from the political establishment. . . . Very few professional media try to explain to citizens what accurate information is and what is false news. Given the amount of “distorted news,” . . . [it] is very difficult to discern what is really true,” said Petković. The public relations departments of local authorities and state-owned enterprises also send manipulative reports on a daily basis. “The authorities also use the tactic of overwhelming [news outlets] with fake events,” said Jovanka Marović, editor-in-chief of Glas Šumadije.

A growing number of organizations are detecting fake news—such as Raskrinkavanje (Disclosure), Istinomer (Truth-O-Meter), and FakeNews Tragač (FakeNews Tracker)—and publishing examples of fake news and misinformation in the media, but they are not enough to cover the enormous amount of such news.

Facebook has entered into partnerships with Agence France-Presse and Istinomer, reducing the visibility of content that has been identified as manipulative. Due to such posts’ reduced reach, several media outlets are suing fact-checking organizations (specifically, Raskrinkavanje) for unfair competition.

“Consequences for nonprofessional journalism practices have been reduced to a minimum,” said Mihajlović.

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

The influence of the Russian state-funded news website and radio station Sputnik on the Serbian media landscape and on public opinion has not diminished. Sputnik has been broadcasting media reports without context for years, and as a consequence the majority of Serbs believe that Russia is Serbia's most important economic partner when, in reality, Serbia conducts more than two-thirds of its foreign trade with the European Union. Ultimately, however, malicious information targeting political opponents of the regime is produced by media aligned with the government. From January 18 to February 18, 2021, in 150 issues of five daily newspapers (*Kurir*, *Informer*, *Večernje novosti*, *Alo*, and *Blic*) 232 texts with elements of hate speech were detected, according to the the *Center for Intercultural Communication's* research, supported by IREX's Learn to Discern project, funded by the U.S. Embassy in Serbia.

From March 1 to December 2021, 77 complaints were submitted to the Press Council.

According to the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, “humiliating statements, spreading of hatred, insults based on ethnicity, attacks on the families of political dissidents, belittling someone’s origin, sexism, setting up so-called health diagnoses, all the way to the use of Nazi symbols [has] become an acceptable narrative.” Hate speech and untruths are the standard rather than the exception in tabloids and on tabloid television channels and are aimed against political dissidents and public figures who express critical views.

No effective sanctions for unprofessional behavior for journalists or editors exist. The lack of appropriate sanctions, in fact, further encourages such behavior. “The government openly discriminates

and uses hate speech against opposition party leaders, independent journalists, artist, intellectuals, and activists who criticize the regime. There are no ramifications for the members of the government, nor for the media,” said Skrozza. Toxic discourse is primarily nurtured in the daily press, on national television channels, and on social networks.

A small number of media outlets recognize the self-regulatory body “Press Council” and respect the code. The chapters on truthfulness of reporting and journalistic attention are the ones most often violated. Compliance monitoring with the Serbian Journalists Code of Ethics, as conducted by the Press Council, has shown a drastic increase in violations of professional standards: in September 2021, as many as 993 articles violated at least one provision of the code—much more than in the same month of the previous five years. The trend continued in October, when more than 50 violations a day were recorded several times.

“**The government openly discriminates and uses hate speech against opposition party leaders, independent journalists, artist, intellectuals, and activists who criticize the regime. There are no ramifications for the members of the government, nor for the media,” said Skrozza.**

Professional media have mechanisms and rules to prevent hate speech and usually document journalists’ behavior. On websites, not all content is open for comments, as individual media do not have the capacity to monitor hate speech. “My outlet was forced to cancel comments on our website, as we do not have enough people to edit comments and there is widespread hate speech. But problems on Facebook and other social networks remained,” said Radojević. “We do check comments on our texts, but after that we are accused of censorship,” said Milena Popović, the editor-in-chief at Istinomer.

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

Information content in minority languages is the rule for Vojvodina public service broadcaster RTV and media supported by the National Minority Councils. For decades, RTV has had content on minority languages produced by minority members, but political influence by the

National Minority Councils (by law, defined as minority media founders) is spreading. “We are witnessing that every change of members in any minority council composition directly influences the editing and managing of minority media,” said Isakov.

RTS has only one short daily television show in the Albanian language and one radio program in the Romani language. The reality is that minority media cannot rely on the commercial advertising market due to the small number of potential buyers of minority members for media products.

Most citizens do not have access to information of different ideologies because all television programs with a national frequency are government controlled. “The only ideology that the citizens are subject to are the ones that the government dictates,” said Skrozza.

The global survey “Who Makes the News,” in which the Center for Media Research of the Faculty of Political Science participated, showed that women in Serbia are poorly represented in the news as interlocutors, analysts, and sources of information. The representation of women in the news is 20 percent—less than the world average of 25 percent and the European average of 28 percent. The presence of women in Serbian traditional media is 19 percent and in online media 25 percent, but violence and hostility toward women in online media is on the rise. Moreover, research conducted by the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Belgrade in early 2021 showed that the total number of women working in journalism in Serbia (60 percent) is far higher than in most countries—but that only 18 percent of them are in editorial management positions.

Local media outlets are increasingly bringing in teenagers to attract young readers. The initiative was started by the Serbian local media association Local Press, one of [Deutsche Welle Akademie](#)’s partners in the Young Media project. Since 2017, the association has been bringing school students to local newsrooms through workshops that are followed by journalism internships.

The availability of information in the Serbian language from minorities is very rare. One exception is the program “Paleta” on RTV, a daily

television show with Serbian subtitles, with the content selection prepared by the television channel’s editorial offices in the languages of national minorities. All pro-government tabloids and television channels exclusively address the Serb majority community, and the presence of other communities is marginal.

On public service television, research showed that some content is adapted for persons with disabilities (only during a preelection period is there presentation of daily news for deaf people, and only one domestic television series has had closed captioning). No commercial television stations have adapted programs for marginalized persons. Minority views are visible in the content of nonprofessional creators, such as TikTokers, who cover a number of important topics related to the issues of vulnerable groups. TikTok has served as a platform for non-professional content producers to raise awareness about marginalized groups and their issues.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

In 2021, 2,608 media outlets were registered. In the first six months, the number of media increased by 6 percent.

Most local media are largely financially dependent on local governments, so they usually broadcast activities of local authorities instead of their own content. Due to financial constraints, the media do not have permanent correspondents, lowering the quality of information. “Only TV stations with high inflows from budgets have enough money for quality productions. All other stations have programs which are obviously produced with limited resources,” said Radojević.

Cofinancing media projects with content of public interest was introduced, with the intention of helping local media and journalists to inform local areas, but it has gone completely awry. Several analysts of Serbia’s cofinancing practices, including IJAS and the Journalists Association of Serbia (JAS), concluded that instead of reaching professional journalists, the funds go to print and television tabloids and sometimes even to new units registered a few days before the bidding deadline. Many times, selection of these co-financing projects does not

reflect the law, and there is no mechanism for control and evaluation.

Although many Serbian citizens are used to getting information at no cost, foreign donors have supported successful crowd-funding campaigns to bring alternative revenue into local media outlets. Testing alternative media revenue models is in its infancy in Serbia and globally; however, USAID’s efforts in this area, through the IREX-implemented Strengthening Media Systems project, have shown that membership programs, audience outreach, online subscription models, and donations are starting to bring in funds to Serbian media outlets.

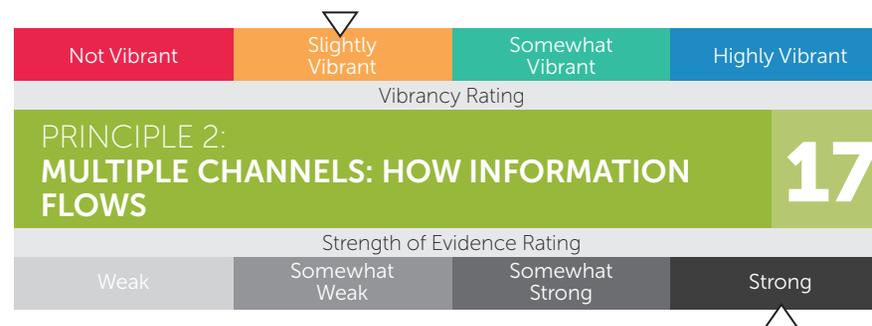
Additionally, media and nongovernmental organizations that engage in investigative journalism, a resource-heavy undertaking, currently rely on foreign donor support. However, there are increasingly popular formats, such as podcasts, that do not require a lot of start-up or operating funds: By the end of 2021, approximately 300 podcasts were available in Serbian.

The advertising market on social networks is not transparent, and it is unknown how much money goes to foreign social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter. Some advertisers still place ads to independent media, but majority of placement goes to media aligned with the government. Advertising in Serbia is highly politicized: Most advertisers are either controlled by or aligned with the ruling party so pro-government media receives a lot of ad placements while independent media are largely shut out.

Production of serials is not determined by the economic interest of financiers but rather political purposes. These serials are turned into hyperproduction (i.e., much more than the market demands or needs) of domestic television series that are financed by state-influenced media and state institutions. “Those patriotic serials are sponsored by local municipalities and often are produced with the intention to ‘beautify’ historical events and developments,” said Marović.

Reliable data on journalist salaries are unknown, but based on recent trends most are under the average Serbian salary: In 2020 the average journalist’s salary was RSD 52,156 a month [\$450], while the average salary in Serbia was RSD 60,169 [\$550]. In local media, journalists have a

minimum salary determined by law. Journalists in foreign-owned media are better off, with higher salaries and better legal protection. “Despite law obligations, employees work in a gray zone, and employers do not fulfill their obligation to pay into journalists’ pension funds. It is not rare for journalists to get much lower pensions than deserved,” said Skrozza.



Principle 2 has the highest score at 17. In this principle, panels were very critical of the indicator that examines people’s rights to create, share and consume information, since related laws are not applied in practice. The indicator studying the independence of information channels received the principle’s lowest score, reflecting the level of saturation present in Serbia’s media market as well as control over information flows.

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

Serbia’s laws relating to the media sector are generally good. Among other things, the criminal code considers endangering the security of “a person performing tasks of public importance in the field of information” a criminal offense. In the second half of 2021, the Ministry of Justice established a working group to amend the criminal code. “There are laws that protect freedom of speech, but at the same time there are constant talks on the possibility of these laws being changed in a way that could harm that freedom and the rights to create and consume information,” said Skrozza.

A research report done by the Slavko Curuvija Foundation and the Centre for Judicial Research (CEPRIS) titled “Protection of Freedom of Speech in the Judicial System of Serbia” states that “only every tenth reported case ends with a final court decision.” Implementation is bad, and journalists are especially affected, as they are persecuted for publishing news. This has happened several times in court—obstructing the right to share information because there is no provision for journalists to be responsible for publishing information. “Proceedings before the courts are delayed and lose the meaning of the verdict. [They] have no impact on long-term protection of journalists and media,” said Mihajlović. IJAS publicly announced that the prosecution is acting selectively: “One of the bigger problems is the narrow interpretation of certain criminal acts, primarily those endangering journalists’ security.”

Targeting certain critical media and journalists by public officials has been particularly pronounced. For example, in 2021 KRIK journalists, who investigate corruption and links between criminal groups and top governmental authorities, were attacked by persons trying to cover up state officials’ involvement in organized crime. The organization Open Parliament has stated that from January 1 to March 10, 2021, members of parliament mentioned certain media and journalists 37 times in a negative context.

Another example of the state’s eroding the right to create information is the case of the cabinet head for Prime Minister Ana Brnabić. He was formally registered as the new president of the supervisory board of *Politika AD*—the oldest Serbian daily, where the larger shareholder is the state. This move belies the rule of law that provides for the full exit of the state from media ownership and is a clear conflict of interest.

The government avoids overtly censoring media or pressuring information and communication technology providers to censor media. However, self-censorship is very present—primarily due to numerous

pressures on journalists. Now there is self-censorship of politicians. “We are often unable to get local information. When the mayor of Kragujevac does not give statements for our portal, all directors of public companies, public utility companies, and party politicians in coalition with the ruling party avoid contact with us. From the moment the mayor accepted the interview for Glas Šumadije, everyone else [came],” said Marovic.

Journalists are targets for death threats on social networks and for online harassment. Harassment campaigns are increasingly a source of concern for journalists’ safety. Online harassment creates deep insecurity and uncertainty among journalists, who fear for their safety and self-censor their behavior because they know that the state does not protect them. According to an IJAS research report titled “Online Attacks on Female Journalists,” women journalists are targeted through specific forms of online harassment or through threats to family members.

Five media associations left the governmental Working Group for Security and Protection of Journalists in March 2021 after members of parliament (along with

television and tabloid campaigns) dangerously and brutally endangered the safety of journalists from KRIK. The International Federation of Journalists has stated that ignoring cases of crimes against journalists encourages more attacks on them. “Legislative framework in Serbia sufficiently protects journalists, but it is not fully implemented and very often is selectively implemented. This year the situation is somewhat better,” said Filipović.

There have been many examples of journalists being endangered: two individuals attacked journalist and radio presenter Daško Milinović with sticks and tear gas in Novi Sad; leaflets appeared all over Šabac presenting Isidora Kovačević, the editor-in-chief of *Podrinske*, as the media patron of thugs; and cartoonist Dušan Patričić’s Facebook page was closed after the intervention of “dissatisfied bots.” Moreover, several

“A practice arose where officials were addressing limited social groups that are important as voters: Serbs, orthodox, uneducated, and mainly males. All other social groups are marginalized and are seldom or never addressed by authorities’ statements,” said Isakov.

independent media were targeted through the creation of fake websites with same name and trademark as original media. “There is a huge pressure on independent journalists and media at both the national and local levels. That pressure is reflected through self-censorship, fear, threats, administrative pressures, campaigns, misinformation, fake news and other ways,” said Petković.

The law protects source confidentiality, and there are no publicized cases currently.

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

The highest score in Principle 2 is for this indicator. Serbia’s media infrastructure meets the needs of most people, especially in cities, but it is inaccessible to numerous citizens in rural areas due to insufficient coverage of cable networks or due to lack of financial means. Only the middle and upper classes have sufficient finances to access most information channels. Cable television, internet, and magazines are pricey in comparison with average salaries.

“In most cases, the government or the political structure in power are completely closed to independent media,” said Petković.

The Novi Sad School of Journalism has conducted a survey concluding that only a small part of information content by public media services (RTS and RTV) is adapted for deaf and hard-of-hearing people, while television content is not adapted for blind and partially sighted people. Commercial media do not adapt content at all for people with disabilities.

According to the government’s Statistical Office, 18.5 percent of citizens have no internet access at home. In certain areas in eastern and southern Serbia, there is no internet access; as a result, it is not possible to watch cable channel programs. As a result, citizens in those areas are left with watching the government-funded RTS, which is vulnerable to political influences within the government. Moreover, people with low income do not use the internet; cancellation of internet services has increased because people are no longer able to afford it. According to

the Statistical Office’s latest *Usa of Information and Communication Technologies 2021*, 97 percent of households with an income of over €600 (\$660) have a home internet connection. Only 58 percent of households with an income of less than €300 (\$330) have internet at home—a decrease of 6 percent, compared with 2019. More than 90 percent of middle- to higher-educated people use the internet, versus about 50 percent of lower-educated citizens. “The infrastructure in Serbia is quite good when it comes to mobile telephone, mobile internet, TV, or radio. What appears to be a problem is Telekom Srbija’s financially and politically motivated control of content,” said Petković.

Access for entire communities is not prohibited, but it is limited by the low penetration of communication networks in remote and underdeveloped parts of the country and by the lack of content for people with disabilities. “A practice arose where officials were addressing limited social groups that are important as voters: Serbs, orthodox, uneducated, and mainly males. All other social groups are marginalized and are seldom or never addressed by authorities’ statements,” said Isakov.

At the moment, certain content of Telekom Srbija, such as programming from N1, cannot be viewed on the internet network of Serbia Broadband and vice versa. The open war between the government-backed Telekom Srbija and the United Media group, among other things, has led to providers’ restricting several television programs.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Although the law for the right to access public information guarantees access, recently government representatives have publicly characterized the laws governing information of public importance as anti-state and harmful. Authorities often avoid answering important questions. The media then try to obtain information through the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance, a practice that prolongs the research process.

A labyrinth of internal regulations prevents journalists from verifying information. Contact names for media are listed for prosecutors' offices and courts, but in practice they do not communicate with the public at all. Financial information on the largest procurements, including those for transport infrastructure construction, are not available. "It is important to talk to people who are directly involved. . . . Very often, in rare press conferences by prosecutors and similar representatives, . . . journalists are forbidden [from asking] questions, especially when those representatives are [discussing] public affairs that shake the whole country," said Radojević.

Most information that independent media in local communities receive is obtained by the Commissioner for Free Access to Information of Public Importance. In some cases, the answer from state institutions is within the legal deadline of 15 days, but often the information is incomplete or declared confidential. The office for this commissioner is overburdened with requests and cannot process them in a timely manner.

All state institutions have persons in charge of answering inquiries from citizens and journalists. However, from year to year the Law on Access to Information of Public Importance is becoming less respected, and recently adopted amendments have reduced these rights because the amendments have expanded the number of institutions that are not obliged to provide information.

State institutions prohibit independent media from receiving important sources of information. They also do not send invitations to independent media members for important events. This is clear discrimination, as the law guarantees equal treatment to all. "In most cases, the government or the political structure in power are completely closed to independent media," said Petković. Skrozza adds, "Journalists of independent media sometimes are not even invited to press conferences or public events and sometimes are not allowed to ask questions." Independent journalists are seen as adversaries, and government personnel acts according to its political party affiliations, not according to state-institution operating criteria.

Spokespeople are practically non-existent in Serbia. Public relations

representatives communicate directly to journalists, and official public statements are done by ministries and officials themselves. Only prosecutors have spokespersons, but they rarely speak in public. Only a few courts have an appointed spokesperson. Government ministries and secretariats, as well as city authorities, usually have a public relations department, but with no names—only phone numbers or email addresses. Top officials have addresses at press conferences or on national television, where they freely expound and occasionally answer preapproved questions. "Spokespeople see their role [as] protecting the public institution they work for and not [providing] information to the public," said Marović.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Members of the ruling party own a large number of local media outlets. Although ownership of media is regulated by law, there are numerous abuses that have led to the concentration of individual ownership and influence over the media. Despite a law prohibiting state ownership of media two decades ago, the government owns quite a few media outlets. The distribution channels are monopolized and dominated by a small number of conglomerates, including the government.

Two parallel information systems have been established in an attempt to monopolize distribution channels: Telekom Srbija and Serbia Broadband. Telekom Srbija is the country's largest cable-operating company, which is 58 percent owned by the Serbian state. According to its own reporting, Telekom Srbija provides services to 79 percent of Serbia's fixed-line users, 44 percent of mobile phone users, and 40 percent of internet users. The Center for Media, Data, and Society has published an analysis of media independence that has shown a worrying trend of an increased number of private media in which state powers have editorial control.

Even though there are licensing laws, they are disregarded; the number of registered media has passed 2,600, but this number is no indication of diversity and quality. "All daily newspapers (except two) are published in Belgrade, so a considerable area of the country is not covered with daily print media," said Isakov.

Public media services do not fulfill their basic role of reporting on events and topics of public interest. Although the law prescribes editorial independence and institutional autonomy, there is no such independence in practice. Public service’s political programs are completely under the ruling party’s control. One example, provided by BIRODI, showed that over a six week period (March 15 - April 20, 2021), Serbia’s president was presented on RTS Daily news for more than two hours without any critique or criticism. They rarely produce fake news but often deceive the public by omitting things or giving a different context. However, RTS has made a huge program improvement due to COVID-19. When schools were closed, RTS broadcast 8,000 school lessons for elementary and high schools, reaching between 500,000 and 700,000 viewers. “Public service media . . . don’t report on important issues or events (protests, targeting people, lack of freedom of speech, etc.) . . . [and] there are still blacklists of people not allowed to speak [on it],” said Skrozza.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

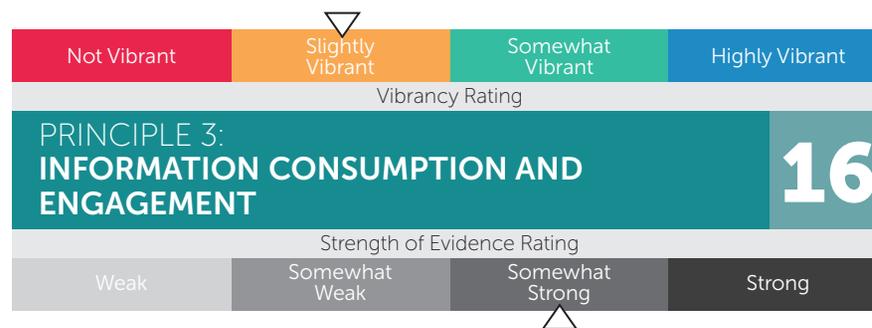
Owners have a dominant influence on the media, dictating editorial attitudes through financial support. According to research done by Media Ownership Monitor Serbia, the eight largest owners in the entire Serbian media sectors have a television and radio audience share of almost 75 percent, and among them are media outlets that strongly support the ruling party. For independent local and regional media, the main sources of income might be budget cofinancing of public interest projects, but the decision process is greatly influenced by authorities on all levels. Authorities also control two vital financial flows for media: public procurement of media services and state advertising. Close links exist among state and party officials and the largest media owners and advertising agencies. “The destiny of media organization depends on their ownership,” said Skrozza.

Independent media are trying to refuse pressure by advertisers and insist on keeping news operations and business operations separate. Mainstream media do not have this problem, as it is their editorial policy to never confront the government and other advertisers.

RTS has two main sources of income: subscriptions and marketing revenues. RTV still has a state budget grant. The RTS budget consists of television subscriptions/fees (80 percent), advertising revenues (15 percent), and program sales (5 percent). During 2021, RTS returned part of the government budget money obtained in the previous year. RTV receives fees for public media service and a budget subsidy due to lower viewership and poor revenues from commercial activities.

In 2021, the independence of REM has further deteriorated and continues with almost complete control of the ruling parties. “Regulatory bodies are directly controlled by the establishment, and their decisions are directly in the interest of one political option,” said Petković.

The Regulatory Agency for Electronic Communications and Postal Services did not react when Telekom Srbija bought several private cable operators and created a monopolistic situation. It also was silent when Telekom and Telenor entered into a contract that was clearly directed against competitor Serbia Broadband, and as a result, Serbia Broadband has been denied access to telecommunication infrastructure and has been exposed to unfair market restrictions. The agency has thus lost the trust of both market operators and end users whose personal data have been misused.



Information consumption and engagement improved somewhat as professional media, together with investigative centers and civil initiatives, succeeded in offering reliable information that has been neglected or forbidden in mainstream media. In the second half of 2021, parallel to citizen protests, consumption of information from

professional media made a breakthrough to those who previously consumed only authority-controlled information.

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

For the first time, the Share Foundation has created and published the Media Privacy Index, which assesses how 50 online media respect the standards of personal data protection. The research concluded that the media have not fully harmonized their online business with the prescribed principles.

The topic of privacy and personal data protection is slowly becoming more relevant for media outlets. All digital attacks are reported to the prosecutor's office for high-tech crime; however, according to the the Share Foundation's monitoring, very few cases receive a final legal epilogue. "Whenever a person is targeted, tabloids find a way to reveal his or her personal data. I am not an expert on the subject, but it is clear that if someone powerful needs your data, they will get it," said Skrozza.

Nineteen organizations from southeast Europe, including Serbia, have established a network that aims to advance digital rights protection and address the growing challenges posed by the widespread use of advanced technologies. Various trainings in the field of digital security are available to journalists, but the quantitative scope of such activities is very limited.

Several panelists believe that media outlets are unable to afford the high costs of sophisticated technology tools that would protect them from digital attacks; other panelists argued that there are good low- or no-cost tools available but their use among the media is unknown. There is not enough protection for websites in practice, and even the emails of many media outlets have been compromised. One of the reasons is that website owners and operators care more about informing users than about protecting data. "We in KRIK have server protection, and every individual journalist has the obligation to use several protection measures of his or her mailbox," said Radojević.

According to research on digital competences by CeSID in late 2021 titled "Support for Data-Based Decision-Making in the Media Labor Market," more than 50 percent of media staff think that there is a need to improve digital literacy. This research indicates that the digital literacy index is a relatively high 11 out of 15, showing that digital technologies are available and that citizens have the necessary knowledge to use them when they have internet availability, the financial capacity, and formal education. Use of technology is widespread, but most users are at a very basic level.

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

Media literacy in Serbian curricula is still in its infancy; the level of media literacy education in schools depends mostly on the teacher's individual engagement. There are no data to testify to the overall level of media literacy.

Media and information literacy is included to some extent in the educational system, but it is implemented through civic education classes as an elective subject and its funding is limited and insufficient. The Ministry of Culture and Information has developed a curriculum for media and information literacy, but it is unknown whether it is being applied in educational institutions. "The authorities do not promote media literacy and at the same time expect unconditional support from citizens for the decisions of infallible members of the government," said Isakov.

With the assistance of IREX under the Learn to Discern project, the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (IJAV) has developed a resource center for media literacy that provides support to teachers, especially those who teach the media, language, and culture subject in high schools and gymnasiums.

The Press Council has published the *Lexicon of Media Literacy*, which contains basic concepts of media literacy. The Press Council has also trained over 350 young people in several cities in media literacy. The Ministry of Interior has offered training on journalist protection and

security for 12 journalists. IREX has conducted a series of trainings for citizens who wanted to raise their level of media literacy, but the trainings have mostly included young people. “A small number of people who are at all media literate only distinguish media in which the information is published and on that basis draw a conclusion about the relevance of information. The vast majority do not check the content placed on the internet in any way,” said Petković.

Media literacy and the ability to detect false statements and misinformation is, among other things, related to formal education.

According to the Open Society Institute – Sofia’s research, the index of (ordinary) literacy has been declining in recent years. “Serbia has a serious problem with general and functional literacy, so media illiteracy is only a part of the puzzle. Media education within schools actually depends on teachers, their passion, and bravery,” said Skrozza.

According to CeSID’s research, media literacy is in a smaller decline, compared with 2020. Citizens themselves poorly rated their ability to assess whether content corresponds to an article’s title, whether it is true, or whether the information comes from several sources. “Unfortunately, the pandemic has shown that people are prone to believe claims that obviously are not supported with evidence and defy science and common sense,” said Radojević. Janjić adds, “A worrying fact is that 50 percent of staff working in education are not vaccinated, and among them are those teaching media literacy.”

According to the Statistical Office’s latest *Usage of Information and Communication Technologies in the Republic of Serbia*, computer and internet usage is almost equal for secondary- and higher-educated people (around 90 percent), while for lower-educated people it is around 50 percent. Thus, it might be assumed that media literacy is similarly distributed.

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

Despite obstacles imposed by authorities, independent media and professional journalists use their freedom of speech and rights to information. Very often they are exposed to persecution, but their influence has risen dramatically, especially in the last months of 2021 when serious citizen protests expanded throughout the country. The role of CSO activists, social networks, and professional journalists has decisively contributed to the success of demonstrations.

“The authorities do not promote media literacy and at the same time expect unconditional support from citizens for the decisions of infallible members of the government,” said Isakov.

According to Ipsos research conducted in 2021, the main sources of information were television (48 percent), online media (25 percent), social networks (15 percent), acquaintances (6 percent), radio (2 percent), print media (2 percent), and none (2 percent).

Due to the huge quantity of misinformation and fake news, people have limited access to reliable information. Fifty percent of citizens have not received the COVID-19 vaccine, and most of them follow conspiracy theories. Although it is possible for people to get qualitative information, it does not mean that they are using it progressively. “Obviously, propaganda influences people; they believe the statements of the president and prime minister. . . . They don’t follow calls for vaccination,” said Cvejić.

Discussion platforms are very rare and are prepared mostly in advance, so they do not allow for pluralism of opinion. “Public debate in Serbia still exists in rare media. Unfortunately, the already-weak practice of involving citizens in decision-making of public interest has been extinguished. It all comes down to political propaganda and an exclusive attitude proclaimed by one political figure,” said Petković.

Debates initiated on social networks have not changed the behavior of the authorities, but they regularly orchestrate attacks by state representatives, tabloids, and members of parliament on anyone who

speaks differently and on media that broadcast alternative views.

Inappropriate speech, hate speech, and misinformation, as well as serious threats, are present. Not everyone exercises their right to report inappropriate content or to report more serious cases to the competent authorities.

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

There are not enough data for reliable ratings except for big television stations, as others do not have the financial resources to pay for expensive research. Most media are far removed from the public interest. The programs they supply are motivated by “remote control competition” to prevent the audience from switching to a non-politically controlled channel. “The audience’s real interest should be to acquire useful information which could be used for some action or decision, as was the case with uprising against Rio Tinto activity in Serbia in 2021,” said Radojević.

There is no press audit, and actual newspaper circulation is unknown. However, the total estimated circulation of all print media in Serbia does not exceed 400,000 copies—a number that decades ago was the circulation of one daily newspaper. Website analyses are followed by all serious media, and recently there have been several support programs (Internews, IREX, etc.) that focus on communication and audience engagement. There is a lack of serious research and mechanisms for measuring audiences and for examining the audiences’ needs. “The media use research to find out the desires and interests of the public, but this research is used in media that support the government as a platform for manipulation,” said Mihajlović.

Few media outlets adhere to high standards of professional ethics prescribed by the Code of Journalists of Serbia, including error correction and fact-based reporting.

“The inability of the authorities to conduct a constructive dialogue on any topic can best be seen with vaccination and pandemic measures,” said Isakov.

Members of the United Media group—such as TV N1, Nova S, *Danas* and Nova—three leading political weeklies, and independent local media and websites exchange information and research results with and from NGOs. Only conflicts of opinion take place on social media networks, and sometimes these conflicts expand beyond social media and into real life conflict.

There are procedures for communication with viewers, readers, and listeners that are defined by law; however, media tend not to engage with their audiences in this manner. A small number of credible media strive to establish contact and adapt content to the public interest as much as possible. The same media also cooperate with civil society. “The inability of the authorities to conduct a constructive dialogue on any topic can best be seen with vaccination and pandemic measures,” said Isakov.

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

Media with common characteristics of community media—particularly with respect to being community-based, along with leveraging volunteers and audience donations—do not exist in Serbia. However, most panelists agree that media established by CSOs and private local media that have active, independent roles function in the place of community media. As such, these media play an extraordinary role in local Serbian areas. “Our media Glas Šumadije [Voice of Šumadija region] was founded as a community media unit, in which a significant amount of content is created at the initiative of citizens. There are only a limited number of such media, and for them citizens are the main source of local information. Citizens support them but refuse to help financially,” said Marović. Mihajlović adds, “There are . . . local media but they are dependent on donations or budgets, so their editorial policy is either support for the community or support for the authorities.”

These local media are a small percentage of the 2,600 registered media,

but credible ones exist and are useful for citizens and marginalized populations in local areas. Some podcasts have elements of community media, too. Other numerous local media that are under government control do not cover vital local topics or misinterpret them. The best illustration is the local media in Kragujevac. A new portal was established in Kragujevac that advertises itself as “the first internet tabloid in the country”; the information, even when exclusively local in nature, is unverified and often maliciously inaccurate. “The experience of FakeNews Tracker is that all local media among which we [have] detected misinformation or fake news do not have the characteristics of community media,” said Janjić.



Unfortunately, Serbian society is divided, and the current political leaders are dividing it more deeply to clearly direct the orientation of their supporters and discourage the opposition. There is media polarization expressed in language, style, political affiliations, and a degree of aggression, so a deep gap has been created between regime media and media that are critically oriented toward the government. There is not a robust audience for nonpartisan sources of information.

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

Only a small number of citizens use multiple sources of information. According to the results of the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media’s research, *Polarized Media—Polarized*

Audience: Serbia, the country’s media scene is characterized by a polarized audience. The percentage of surveyed citizens who stated that they trust the media (full, accurate, and fair news reporting) only slightly exceeds the percentage of surveyed citizens who say they do not trust the media. The results also indicate that there is a relatively high level of trust in investigative media and fact-checking portals, whose reach is modest. The specific media outlets that respondents have singled out as the most or least trustworthy outlet clearly illustrates audience polarization. “Facts do not form the basis of the attitudes and thinking of the majority of citizens,” said Mihajlović.

Južne vesti has researched bot activity in the region of Niš, and it was clear that bots backed by local authorities intentionally disable any constructive discussion on social networks or portals. This is another indication of how authorities understand politics and democracy.

As a rule, debates that take place on social networks are fierce and unconstructive, often targeting dissidents instead of challenging views. According to Simon Kemp’s DataReportal report, “Digital 2021: Serbia,” the average Facebook user leaves three comments a month. Despite these statistics, it is possible to conclude that there are groups of passionate commentators and bots, especially if they are mobilized by a certain idea (political, health) or institution. “There are media outlets that are not biased with political options in the country, but when it comes to debate and exchange of opinions, social networks are the dominant space because in the mainstream media, there is mostly no debate,” said Radojević.

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

Political views and attitudes are formed mainly on the basis of misinformation—not quality information. Systematic distrust in the media is one of the biggest consequences of fake news. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how low media literacy is and how easily misinformation can deter people from getting COVID-19 vaccinations. For example, psychology professor Mila Aleckovic, who often plants conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 virus, in October 2021

announced on her Twitter account that “no one could prove in court that the virus is isolated.” In March 2021, *Tabloid* published a worrying claim that “two hundred times more deaths are caused by vaccines than the coronavirus,” and that “vaccines are more dangerous than COVID-19.” The tabloid referred to the alleged statement of the director of the French National Health Service, but France’s Ministry of Health of France denied to Raskrikavanje that such a statement exists.

Citizens cannot engage with elected officials due to Serbia’s proportional electoral system at all levels of government. Rather than direct votes to elect representatives, the proportional electoral system means that citizens vote for a ballot named after the party leader and not for specific individuals. This makes communication impossible for citizens. Even if there is communication with such elected officials, it is possible mostly for like-minded people. Fake information is the predominant preelection trump card—where parties make unrealistic or even caricature-like promises—and is used as the main method to influence voters and election outcomes.

The citizens’ behavior is somewhat more reasonable on health problems. The government-led COVID Crisis Headquarters has been advocating vaccination, but it also has a member who is actively casting doubts on vaccinations publicly. As a result, the average citizen does not know how to use crisis headquarters information productively, as it often provides confusing information.

The COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination push has shown that people believe in all types of conspiracy theories, including those not related to health. Misinformation is spread on social networks, other media, and among citizens. Authorities took mild and soft measures to limit the activities of highly visible antivaxxers and disinformers only after September—when Serbia jumped to the top of the world’s list of infected and COVID-related deaths and came under pressure from doctors, CSOs and citizens initiatives. Despite the availability of five different top-level vaccine types at the beginning of the pandemic, more than half of the population has not been vaccinated with even a single dose.

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

Principally speaking, CSOs gladly share their information, but media use of reliable information is polarized. Some use information productively, but government-controlled mainstream media often ignore qualitative information coming from the civil society sector. However, numerous protests have been launched against ore exploration and the opening of new mines. These spontaneous actions of the citizens have been supported by green CSOs, and some of them have already announced that they will form political parties and compete in the 2022 elections. “At the local level this year, there were spontaneously organized initiatives in the cities, some of which were followed by protests,

mostly about environmental protections, excessive construction of certain zones, and waste disposal. These initiatives attract media attention,” said Isakov. Information about these protests was spread almost exclusively through social media networks.

“Facts do not form the basis of the attitudes and thinking of the majority of citizens,” said Mihajlović.

More government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) openly support the regime, and they can be part of different governmental working groups claiming to represent the “civil sector.” Skrozza noted that the formation of GONGOs has escalated. These organizations disseminate misinformation and cooperate with tabloids—and they are winning bids for projects of public importance. “Independent CSOs rely on quality information, and GONGOs provide low-quality information to support the authorities,” said Mihajlović.

CSOs and credible media are in the minority and are in an unenviable position; however, their potential to influence public opinion has been growing. People’s initiatives regarding huge ecological problems have grown into political protests with wider implications because of the success in informing citizens on real ecological problems.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been key in information verification. The result of research by different NGOs is a valuable media source. “This research has expanded greatly in 2021, providing reliable

information to citizens and media. One of the key examples is the [report on the position of the wards of children's homes](#),” said Janjić.

Citizen involvement in decision-making processes has been somewhat improved because the government invited CSOs to join the process of preparing new legal provisions. Panelists think that CSO involvement serves as a political card for the government due to final decisions being ultimately made by political rulers. Yet progress has been made, as debates between the government and CSO representatives has occurred for the first time. “Very often, the practice of the state was nontransparent [regarding] preparation of new laws, and such drafts, after being published, provoke strong criticism and reasonable remarks. The authorities are [then] forced to withdraw the proposal and include CSOs in the new round of preparation,” said Radojević.

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

Consultative mechanisms exist but are misused or ignored. The new practice of government consultation unfortunately is pro forma, rather than a genuine attempt to solicit input. “Government officials refer to media news or information from civil society when explaining decisions but not necessarily in a positive context. Such reviews are often of a predatory, aggressive nature. Sociopolitical agendas are usually created on the basis of spin,” said Janjić.

Government ministers and the president often refer to data from police investigations, presenting and publishing evidence based on their own opinion and announcing the actions of the police and the prosecution. This is done with the belief that the “people understand” the decisions of the government.

“There are media outlets that are not biased with political options in the country, but when it comes to debate and exchange of opinions, social networks are the dominant space because in the mainstream media, there is mostly no debate,” said Radojević.

Press conferences are not regularly held by government ministers, municipalities, and city councils. The current practice is to address only the beginning or end of infrastructure works, opening of factories, and similar occasions. Any questions by independent media journalists are either ignored or used as an occasion to discredit the media they work for, their owners, or the journalists themselves. Instead of using

facts and evidence, authorities extensively explain their future moves and overwhelm the audience with unrealistic promises to convince citizens that great economic growth is knocking on Serbia's door.

Indicators of economic growth and data on the number of employees and wages are often deliberately placed in an inappropriate context to reinforce the government's message or to divert attention from the growing number

of corruption scandals in the government. Official representatives selectively use information that supports government propaganda, and they refer to news from government-aligned media. They mostly react critically to information that is not favorable to the government. “The government directly uses misinformation without any empathy for social interest or harm to society and individuals,” said Petković. Radojević added, “Press conferences, rare debate shows, and the narrative of politicians on social networks are mainly oriented toward belittling political opponents and collecting political points from voters. Such narratives often abound in hate speech [and] in fake news.”

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Panelists agreed that authorities systematically ignore instances of corruption that have been uncovered by the media. Only after very strong pressure from public institutions does the government react, albeit with negative consequences. “The government's response to . . . cases of corruption is devastating and boils down to ignoring [and]

defending suspects or attacking media outlets that have pointed to corruption,” said Janjić.

Independent media and investigative CSO centers publish quality information on corruption cases, but the authorities respond by trivializing every case. The government often obstructs any fight against corruption at both the local and national level.

Participation in government and proximity to government still provide the best protection against corruption. The government covers up, delays proceedings, attacks whistleblowers, and defends its own members at all costs. Investigations, indictments, and lawsuits themselves—if and when they are launched—drag on for months and years. “Stories of investigative journalists are the best example of how immune the authorities are to detecting corruption. Judicial bodies almost never react, and public pressure is not enough to initiate them,” said Radojević.

Authorities are passive when human rights and civil liberties are threatened. They react a little faster to rights and freedom violations if such information is accompanied by reactions from the international community or by citizen protests and public gatherings. There is usually a higher turnout and better control of the election process in local communities after sharing basic information about elections and about local citizens’ problems.

After more than two years of negotiations on election conditions, with and without EU mediation, it is clear that information alone—regardless of how qualitative it is—is not enough for current authorities to organize free and fair elections, especially regarding rules for the periods before campaign announcements and during campaigns. Quality information is suppressed if it can affect the outcome of elections. “Pressures on numerous local media, some of [which] were shut down or taken over by the ruling political party, are proof of the government’s reluctance to provide quality information and their influence on free and fair elections at the local level,” said Marović.

Since the government does not react, victims of corruption and whistleblowers—usually citizens—are turning more often to media and

journalists as a last resort. This process has escalated, especially in local areas where people trust the media more than the local police or authorities. Citizens have no one else to turn to, and in these types of cases, citizens trust the independent and professional media and their journalists.

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