

# SERBIA

intervju  
na mreži

#INTERVJUNAMREZI



## Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

15

In 2020, the parliamentary elections in June, a record budget deficit voted by parliament in December, corruption, and the COVID-19 pandemic all impacted Serbian media.

The main opposition parties boycotted the elections, so the leading party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), won 188 mandates (75 percent of the total), resulting in a one-party political system in Serbia. According to the Serbian Fiscal Council, by the end of 2020, “The budget revision envisions by far Serbia’s biggest fiscal deficit since the start of publishing data.” However, Serbia’s GDP was estimated to drop just 1.5 percent, significantly less than the 5 percent expected of other countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

The year was burdened with a number of serious instances of corruption, almost all discovered by investigative journalists. According to GRECO,<sup>1</sup> Europe’s anti-corruption body, Serbia is five years late in fulfilling GRECO’s 2015 recommendations for joining the European Union.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, 107 doctors and 32 other medical workers have died, and the country has seen citizen protests.

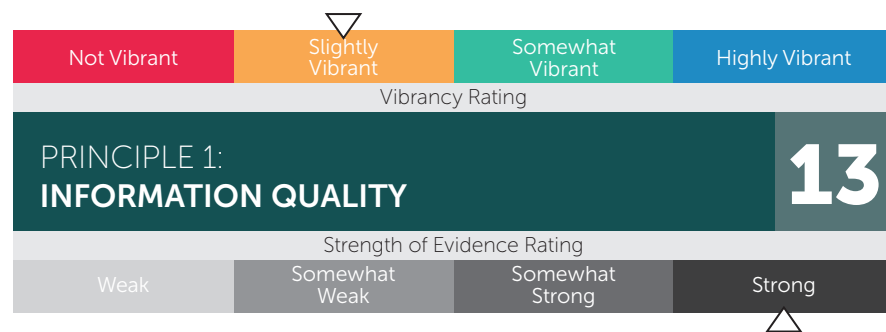
Panelists all gave similar scores for the principles and indicators. The overall country score is 15, with Principle 1 (information quality) and Principle 4 (inclusiveness and diversity of content) scoring 13. Principle 3 (information and consumption and engagement) reached 14, and Principle 2 (information flows) scored highest at 17. The turbulent past year produced two new media phenomena: unprecedented

noncritical coverage of candidates during the election campaign and media merely transmitting authorities’ information during the state of emergency (in almost 95 percent of all stories, according to research conducted by BIRODI.)<sup>2</sup>

The press violated the Journalist’s Code of Ethics, established and monitored by the Press Council—an independent self-regulatory body for Serbia’s media sector—in 3,643 texts. The year also saw the explosion of fake news and extensive efforts by the ruling party and president to prevent any media criticism of authorities. For the first time in two years, several journalists were arrested, and 189 attacks on journalists were registered, of which 32 were physical attacks and 14 were attacks on journalists’ property. The nonfunctioning rule of law remains Serbia’s main challenge, and its impact is felt within the media sector.

1 The Group of States against Corruption, Strasbourg, France

2 Bureau of Social Research, Belgrade



The extremely large number of registered media outlets in Serbia could provide an infrastructure for high-quality and diverse information. However, sharp division in the media sector, which itself is a consequence of an increasingly polarized society, resulted in a lower score for Principle 1. There are two main media groups: those that produce quality content in accordance with professional standards and, by far the larger group, those that produce an abundance of content in an unethical and irresponsible way. The latter group does not respect facts and does not truthfully report political developments. According to research from the Center for Strategic Policy (CFSP) in Belgrade, every sixth title in Serbian print dailies was fake news. Panelists gave the VIBE indicators examining quality information on a variety of topics, along with the indicator on inclusivity and diversity, the highest scores in this principle, while giving their lowest score to the indicator studying sufficient resources for content production.

All panelists agreed that with more than 2,500 registered media, the infrastructure exists to produce varied content. But at the same time, there is not enough staff for high-quality productions; in other words, given the number of media outlets active in Serbia, there are not enough highly trained media professionals to produce professional-level content. Though 30 television scripted serial programs were filmed, with limited staffing, commercial stations with national coverage tend to produce things like reality television and talk shows. The public broadcasters RTS and RTV have a variety of genres, while the feature television content is mainly on cable channels.

Just as journalism is polarized, so, too, is the university education for journalists. The panelists had differing views on journalism education, with some feeling graduates are unprepared to work in the newsroom. Others feel journalism cannot be learned in schools or through training programs from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) but only through direct experience in the industry, thus making professional development contingent on the quality of the newsroom in which journalists work. Others believe that in order for students to gain employment at a quality newsroom, they must learn fundamentals at school. Journalism education is broad and universal because of the varied number of media and how rapidly the industry is changing. Education at the University of Belgrade Faculty of Political Science is of high quality, but there are many low-quality private institutions. The Faculty teaches the basics of journalism and prepares students to deal with the challenges of the profession. “Education for the profession is one of the better parts of the Serbian media environment. We have one of the oldest journalism education programs, which includes full-time undergraduate, master’s and doctoral studies at the University with comparatively high ranking at the Shanghai University list<sup>1</sup> in our region,” said Snježana Milivojević, a professor with the Faculty of Political Science.

A small number of content producers act in an ethical and responsible way and respect the facts, striving to publish only true content. Others knowingly violate all ethical principles. The Secretary General of the Press Council, Gordana Novaković, said the Council, an independent, self-regulatory body, received 165 complaints in 2020, twice as many as the previous year. The complaints mostly refer to violations of the first chapter of the Code of Journalists of Serbia: truthfulness of reporting. In 2020, the most common violation was not adhering to the presumption of innocence, followed by violations of the right to privacy. Professional consequences for publishing unethical and unprofessional content are weak or nonexistent and do not produce behavior changes. Media outlets rarely and selectively apply sanctions for violating the Code of Journalists of Serbia. “There are a large number of media outlets in Serbia, but they are most often either near the margins of respecting the professional standards of the Code of Journalists of Serbia or far below,”

1 <http://www.shanghairanking.com>

said Vesna Radojević, of KRIK Investigative Network in Belgrade.

Although there are numerous choices for media, some specialized topics, such as real economic trends, are rarely covered, especially in mainstream media news programs. “Professionally reported information, unfortunately, can be found in only a few media outlets,” said Milivoje Mihajlovic, assistant general manager with RTS Public Media. “In other media (controlled by the government), all information is contextualized for their audience.”

The level of thematic diversity in the media is insufficient, and the diversity of represented views and values is even worse. There are media that report on national, international, and local topics, but local coverage is often weaker and some topics on ethnic communities are poorly represented in the mainstream media. Local content is best covered by local websites. The everyday problems of the population are a rare topic in all media, and news on national politics dominates even social media platforms. “In Serbia, media and content pluralism is endangered, and media that have an independent editorial policy are marginalized and inaccessible for the majority of the population,” explained Nedim Sejdinović, a columnist and editor-in-chief of *Autonomija* in Novi Sad.

There are appropriate journalism schools and different trainings for journalists, but education for editors is lacking. Tabloid editors do not respect professional and ethical standards, as behavior is not sanctioned. “Most of my colleagues from the faculty ended up working at the tabloids, where they adapt to the outlet’s editorial policy and produce content not based on evidence,” said Radojević. “The big problem in editorial departments is poor development of young journalists.” Editors do not care about professional advancement and do not transfer editorial knowledge or experience to them.

Media try to put content in the appropriate context, but it is usually according to the political framework they are in favor of, rather than the public interest of the audience. Serbia is dominated by print and electronic media that do not hesitate to present obvious untruths. However, there are also professional media that try to provide audiences

with accurate and relevant information, but their influence is much smaller. In addition to spreading fake news, tabloid media often publish information from police investigations, which should not be available until they are closed. The assessment of whether information is fact-based shows that the current environment and commitment to the profession is divided and that it is worse than in previous years. In particular, panelists assessed that authorities extensively spread fake news to present themselves in a good light. Fake news is their most important tool to gain voters. There are no professional ramifications for spreading false information.

Most misinformation is spread through tabloids and social media networks. There are no effective sanctions for unprofessional work, which could end this practice and prevent its recurrence.

Political officials do not hesitate to lie at press conferences and contribute significantly to the spread of fake news and misleading information. False information and, even more often, half-truths from the government were evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the BIRN newsroom revealed that Serbian authorities were hiding data on the real number of those infected. “Disinformation is part of everyday life, and unfortunately it is directly connected to the influence of the government on the media sphere,” said Sejdinović. “With disinformation, the government creates public opinion.”

In 2020, Facebook entered a partnership with Truth-O-Meter (Istinomer) and AFP’s fact-checking service for Serbia, which has contributed to the fight against misinformation in terms of reducing the virality of incorrect content. According to IREX Serbia, one fake news story, through various pages and profiles, is shared an average of 927 times. From March 12 to April 12, 2020, a total of 43 false narratives were shared through the media and social networks and were shared 241 more times by online and traditional media, with more than 220,000 shares on Facebook. “A large number of media outlets are spreading false or misleading information without any hesitation, which is confirmed by the analyses from fact-checking platforms,” said Slobodan Kremenjak, an attorney at ZC Law Office.

Foreign governments do not spread false news directly, with one exception: the network of Serbian radio stations that broadcast “Sputnik Serbia,” a branch of Russia Today that promotes open political propaganda. In particular, Radio Sputnik interprets certain news events in such a way as to oppose Serbia’s accession to the European Union. “The influence of foreign governments is not noticeable. It comes down to the fact that domestic media, almost uncritically, transmit information from foreign media that are under the influence of foreign governments. But that cannot be considered a direct influence of foreign governments on the domestic media,” explained Mihajlovic.

The intention to inflict damage is often the only motive from the president, prime minister and MPs. Their goal is to present political opponents as traitors, foreign spies, robbers, and liars. This is always done through dominant media under the authorities’ control. “There is a lot of hate speech, and government representatives are leading the way,” said Bojan Cvejić, the executive director of Danas. When the government,

directly or through media, creates and disseminates content intended to cause harm, a small number of media may request a formal apology or a resignation, usually unsuccessfully. The regulatory body for electronic media does not react to hate speech or malicious information, and the Press Council does not have enough strength to stop the increase of this phenomenon. After journalist Ana Lalić was arrested due to her coverage

of the government’s distribution of personal protective equipment to medical workers and subsequently released, pro-government media initiated a hate speech campaign against her. A total of 106 articles were published, followed by 1,700 readers’ comments on 16 observed portals. The daily newspaper *Kurir* published eight articles containing adverse claims relating to Lalić: “Irresponsible journalist Ana Lalić released despite lying,” and “journalist without honor and shame.” Despite the fact that her reporting was accurate, *Kurir* still wrote an article entitled, “Journalist Ana Lalić consciously lied: she violated the code ‘to instill

fear among the people.”

Hate speech and untruths are the standard rather than the exception in tabloids and tabloid television, aimed against political opponents, public figures, and critical media outlets. “The tabloid media see their only function as blaming the current opposition to the government. The content of these media is synchronized with the campaigns of government representatives; they use the same rhetoric and whole phrases,” said Sinisa Isakov, a professor of media and technology at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad. There has been an increase in hate speech against migrants and neighboring countries, both in media and on social media networks. This xenophobic reporting does not produce a reaction from state institutions. There are no effective sanctions for unprofessional behavior from journalists, and editors are essentially under no self-regulatory restrictions. The absence of appropriate sanctions, in fact, encourages further unprofessional, and often uncivilized, behavior. During 2020, a slightly stricter policy

was introduced for YouTube content creators; now they are obligated to mark inappropriate words if they want to keep advertisers.

A small number of media outlets in Serbia respect inclusivity and diversification, while tabloids generally address only Orthodox Serbs. Marginalized groups are poorly presented in the media. Thanks to the existence of specialized media, project

funding, and professional independent media, there is some content dedicated to inclusion, equality, and respect for diversity. However, the situation is far from satisfactory and is deteriorating. The media of marginalized groups have extremely low circulations and listenership/viewership.

In Serbia, there are a significant number of media outlets in the languages of national minorities, but they are unevenly distributed. Only in Vojvodina is there a stable network of media that inform citizens in minority languages. In 2020, the production of minority content

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on Radio-Television of Vojvodina was threatened due to the mass termination of contracts with the part-time associates who covered minority programs. The other public-service broadcaster, RTS, does not have adequate programming in the languages of national minorities. “The lack of information about the experiences and views of people of different ethnic, racial, and/or religious backgrounds is obvious, and it is noticeable even in the media that are otherwise of high quality and maintain appropriate standards,” said Kremenjak. Additionally, very little content is adapted to the needs of blind and other handicapped persons.

### Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Gender equality is a problem throughout the Serbian media sector, despite the Government of Serbia’s inclusion of gender equity in its Media Strategy, which was adopted in early 2020. Newsrooms are mostly female; in some instances, newsrooms have just one male employed, and he is the editor. Women directors and media editors are rare, although most journalists in Serbia are women. The audiovisual sector, reporting, content writing, and on-camera jobs are also primarily staffed by women; audiovisual newsrooms are close to 70 percent female. They have difficulties with professional

growth and struggle to reach management and editorial positions. Few women are also part of the ownership structure in media. The leading print media and television outlets have never had a female director or editor-in-chief. Also, the representation of women in all informative contents is 20 percent. “The general atmosphere is utilitarian. It is not subject to critical thinking or dialogue, even at the family level. The cult of ‘paterfamilias’ dominates here; people at all levels advocate

authoritarianism,” said Mijat Lakicevic, of *Novi Magazin*. “It is a cultural problem of society: people uncritically accept everything that is served to them.” Gender equality is much more prevalent on social media networks and other less institutionalized and less controlled ways of transmitting information. “Information on the experiences and views of women, Muslims, Catholics, etc. is less accessible to citizens. The program is created according to the interests of the majority of the population, and men continue to dominate the world,” said Milica Šarić, editor-in-chief at the Center for Investigative Journalism.

The VIBE indicator on sufficiently resourced content production is the lowest-scored indicator in Principle 1. Panelists gave the lowest scores to the sub-indicators on government subsidies or advertising contracts not distorting the market journalists’ earnings, polarization of advertising, and transparency of state subsidy distribution.

In a country with 2,500 registered media (or one media outlet per 2,800 inhabitants), there are not enough financial resources to support the normal operations of the average media outlet. While there is not yet any specific research that has studied the effect of the COVID global pandemic on Serbia, data presented in a USAID-supported forum in Fall 2020 showed that the advertising market in the first part of 2020 contracted. In 2020, the European Union provided short- and long-term financial support of €2.4 million (\$2.9 million), through a specific grant scheme to help Serbian professional media overcome consequences of the pandemic.

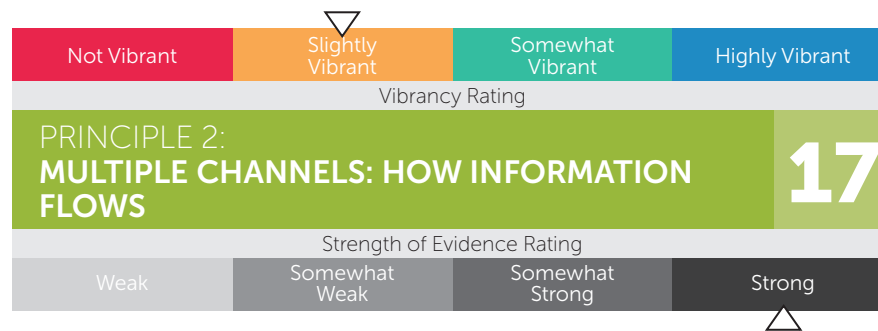
Among the outlets are as many as 224 television stations, only a few of which can ensure the smooth functioning and production of decent content. The number of outlets demonstrate a lack of regulation in the media market in Serbia. The market is also burdened with nontransparent financing and state interference. Very few media can effectively plan and conduct their business. The local media are in the worst situation by far, essentially just trying to find ways to survive the year. Only a small number of corporate media outlets, founded by foreign companies, have adequate production resources. “Professional content producers don’t have enough resources to work, so media

managers almost always fail to resist financial pressures,” explained Mihajlović.

In 2020, according to the McCann Group research, the total advertising budget placed in Serbian media fell 5.7 percent, below the €200 million (\$243 million) reached in 2019. Television accounts for 53 percent of advertising and Internet advertising is 20 percent. International social media companies continue to draw revenue away from Serbian media outlets; in 2020, Facebook alone captured 90 percent of the digital advertising revenue in the country.

State funds create unfair competition in all fields, and the advertising market in Serbia is very politicized: When the government changes, leading advertisers also shift their ad placement strategy. “State advertising subsidies define the market because they are directed to state-friendly media,” said Gordana Bjeletić, the editor-in-chief of *Južne vesti*. The problem is so large that the government sends inspectors to private companies that advertise in non-regime media.

Technological developments have enabled the production of content with cheaper tools, such as mobile journalism. Though it is rare, some outlets manage to cover part of their business costs with subscriptions or other readers’ support. Within the USAID Strengthening Media Systems Project, implemented by IREX, the Podcast.rs platform was developed, on which about 170 potential podcasts were registered. A performance analysis has not yet been completed, so the effects of the project are unknown. Podcasting is becoming increasingly popular; many content creators have tried to experiment in the field, but the audience has not changed its passive attitude. Crowdfunding is a potential source of revenue, and it has been tested by media outlets in Serbia on a limited basis. “For innovative financing methods such as crowdfunding, more money is spent organizing crowdfunding projects than is raised through its implementation,” said Sejdinović. Miša Tadić of Radio Boom 93 explained, however, that some nontraditional funding types are practiced in a few dozen outlets, usually supported by foreign donors. Lastly, very few journalists are decently paid, and most do extra work to survive.



The main obstacle to information flows in 2020 was the risks to journalists. Although the Public Attorney says that the number of physical attacks on journalists and threats to their safety has dropped significantly, databases kept by journalists’ associations do not match those records. Four journalists were arrested, and more than 100 were harassed. Two unknown assailants broke into the home of Jeton Ismaili, the editor of the Albanian minority portal Folonline, and threatened to kill his wife, who was with three children. On social networks, women face a large number of threats and harassment. Several ownership monopolies of print, online, and cable media contribute to lower information diversity.

There is legal protection of journalistic freedom, but in practice, the situation is different. “The old story is repeated,” said Kremenjak. “We have constitutional guarantees, we have laws, but there are problems in implementation.” The year was marked by a number of arrests of journalists, including the arrests of a cameraman and reporter from KTV in Zrenjanin. During the July protests in Belgrade against government measures to combat the coronavirus, there were numerous physical attacks against journalists, as well as the destruction of equipment and obstruction of the journalists’ work. Journalist Igor Stanojević received several blows with a truncheon and then was detained despite the fact that the police knew he was a journalist. The most significant case in 2020 was the arrest of Ana Lalić, a reporter with the Nova.rs portal. Lalić was arrested after reporting on the lack of personal protective equipment for medical workers at the Clinical Center of Vojvodina. “Legal protection of freedom of speech and press exists, but the

government has reached the ranks of the judiciary,” said Milica Šarić. “The government is trying to restrict freedom of speech in every possible way.”

There is no formal censorship, but a high degree of self-censorship exists, particularly on subjects critical to the government. “I don’t think that the government actively and often censors the media,” said Stefan Janjic, of the Fake News Tracker. “The media loyal to the authorities certainly know what kind of reporting is expected from them, so there is no need for preventive or suspensive censorship.”

The confidentiality of sources is protected in law and in practice, but there are exceptions. In the case of Ana Lalić, there was strong pressure on her to reveal the sources of her reporting, and her two telephones were confiscated in the search for the source. This is a good illustration of the government’s relationship to the judiciary and its relationship to legal norms. “The confidentiality of sources is legally guaranteed, but wiretapping and monitoring of journalists is a nonviolent violation of this right,” explained Šarić.

### Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

IPTV users and a 16 percent growth in DTH users, a consequence of the increase in media consumption through mobile phones.

According to research from the Serbian Statistical Office on ICT usage, as much as 80 percent of households have access to broadband. However, a 2020 report from the Republic Agency for Electronic Communication (RATEL) found that only 65 percent of households (1.65 million) have broadband access. Both documents registered growth. In the same period, access to media content increased by 2 million people, a growth of 6.4 percent. This includes a 10 percent increase in

There is a solid information infrastructure, but it is unavailable throughout the country. Cable operators are divided, so not all citizens can see alternative television stations on all networks. Telekom Serbia, of which the state owns 58 percent, holds 50 percent of the broadband market and 40 percent of the media content distribution market and refuses to include the 24-hour news program “N1 TV,” which is considered to be the most professional television news program in Serbia. In 2020, Telekom Serbia continued to invest in the network of optical cables to end users, offering an Internet speed of 1 Gb/s, but only in densely populated areas and large cities, which already have good broadband access from ADSL and KDS technologies. The state has a special fund for the development of electronic communications, but it is poorly used to finance the development of infrastructure in areas where it does not exist at all.

Few websites were blocked; during 2020, the government primarily blocked foreign online betting sites, in line with the Serbian regulations on lottery games. However, the Minister of Internal Affairs, Aleksandar Vulin, pledged to abolish anonymity on the Internet.

Most people can afford television and cable, but access to the Internet or to expensive political weeklies is more difficult. “As many as 60 percent of voters do not use the Internet,” said Tadić. “There is a basic infrastructure in Serbia for informing people, but for primarily economic reasons, sometimes citizens cannot access information,” said Lakicevic. According to the Statistical Office of Serbia’s publication *Use of ICT in Serbia 2020*, 59 percent of households with a monthly income below €300 (\$360) have a home Internet connection.

Regulations allowing the right to free access to information exist and are used specifically by investigative journalists, but there are still serious obstructions in implementation. “There is a big difference between the norm and reality,” Lakicevic said. “Laws generally meet European standards, but they are poorly or selectively enforced.”

In 2020, state institutions used the coronavirus pandemic and state of emergency to ignore the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance and all its provisions. Subsequently, the practice of providing



information of public importance was further reduced, although due to COVID-19, the need for information was greater. Requests for information were ignored, and often no explanation was given. In 2020, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance reacted positively to journalists' requests sent to the Clinical Center by ordering it to submit information, but the Center did not respond to the Commissioner's order. Penalties for not responding are weak and ineffective.

The number of complaints to the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance is increasing, as are the number of government documents that are declared official secrets. Data on large procurements, including those for the construction of traffic infrastructure and medical supplies and devices due to COVID-19, were not available to the public.

Serbian citizens are systematically prevented from accessing important information during the broadcasting of parliamentary sessions on the public-service broadcaster. As the support for all of the government's proposals in parliament is guaranteed, a unique development happened during the December proposal for the Serbian 2020 budget rebalance. Instead of discussing important economic and social topics, MPs for hours were ad hominem attacking nonparliamentary political opponents who were not present. "Broadcasts of all-day parliamentary sessions of the practically one-party parliament no longer enable insight into different political views but turn the viewers into passive observers of the Parliamentary 'reality program.' They also leave no room for the media to investigate the consequences of proposed laws," said Isakov.

Spokespersons of state institutions differ drastically. Some respond quickly and reliably to inquiries, while others are absolutely passive, with no communication to the media at all. Courts and prosecutors have particularly bad practices. "Information services in some ministries are oversized. The departments have their own journalists and cameramen for propaganda spots creation. Spokespersons are on duty for good news, which the government wants to send to the public, and then they ignore all questions that do not fit that image," said Bjeletić. Radojević added, "During the coronavirus pandemic and especially during the state of emergency, most state institutions abused laws on access to information of public importance. The government has even tried to

ban local governments and ban them from giving timely information to the media."

Authorities use public appearances and press conferences to provide incomplete or untrue information and manipulate facts. Spokespeople very rarely manage to build a positive reputation with journalists or the public. "Government spokespersons exist more to defend their bosses from the public than to inform the public," Lakicevic said.

Laws regulating media concentration are in line with European standards but are inconsistently and selectively enforced. There are no specific sectoral regulations that deal with concentration in media-related industries. General regulations on the protection of competition are applied, but they have not prevented, for example, the creation of a duopoly in the field of media content distribution, where both SBB and Telekom Serbia are fighting for users by limiting the availability of content on a competitive network. Both complain to the Commission for Protection of Competition, which neither acts nor resolves complaints.

National television and radio frequencies are allocated in a suspicious manner and are not withdrawn for violating regulations. When renewing the licenses for terrestrial broadcasting, REM did not evaluate the behavior of any media during the previous period. All licenses were automatically extended for all outlets, including two commercial television stations with national coverage that air primarily reality television programs.

There is still no separation of distributors from content owners, which was a valid practice until 2011. In the electronic media sector, the two strongest distributors control the entire media scene. Three regulators—RATEL, REM, and The Commission for Protection of Competition—should protect the end users by enabling the appearance of all main media in both networks, but none of the regulators have done so.

Public-service broadcasters only broadcast the views of the ruling coalition. Debate programming does not exist at all. "The public-service broadcaster is not a public service; it is the state television," said Cvejić. "Both public media services are absolutely not independent from the influence of authorities," add Sejdinovic. "We have entered a phase

when this is no longer hidden.” Still, in 2020, the RTS public broadcaster became a platform for education programming amid school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

All panelists believe that at most mainstream media outlets the influence of owners on editorial policy is visible. In one example from November 2020, the owner of the opposition weekly *NIN* changed the front page selected by the editor, which clearly shows how much the founders of media influence editorial policy. *NIN* intended to have a photo from the Arms Fair from two years ago on the front page, which shows a close-up of a sniper aimed at President Aleksandar Vučić. Ringier Axel Springer, which publishes *NIN*, announced that the intended front page, which had already been published online, was inappropriate, especially in a country where one prime minister was assassinated.

“The editorial policies of many media organizations are influenced by the owners and the owners’ relations with politicians and advertisers. The Serbian public-service broadcaster absolutely avoids any move that would criticize the government,” said Šarić. “The ability of the government to change funding for the public-service broadcaster prevents an independent editorial policy. REM as a regulatory body has repeatedly shown its dependence on the current political scene.”

Most of the media in Serbia depend on state subsidies and advertising. Thus, reporting on those businesses is often off-limits, with the business interests of advertisers influencing editorial decisions. “At Danas, newsroom and business operations are separate, but they do intertwine,” said Cvejić, who serves as executive director of *Danas*. There are a small number of media outlets with independent editorial policies, but they also depend heavily on donor support for project activities.

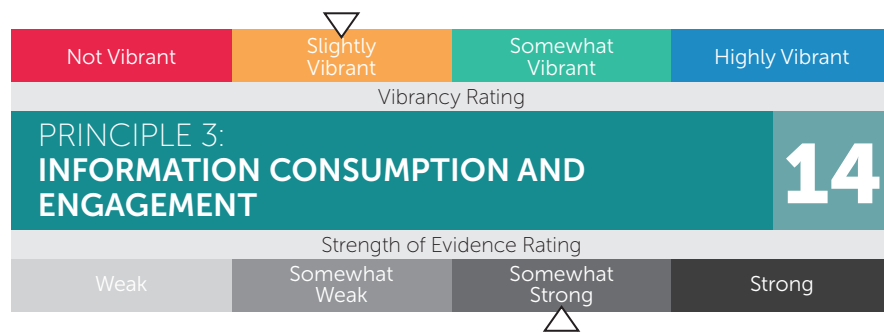
Public-service broadcasters are financed from their advertising

activities, subscription fees, and the state budget. The planned amount of 2.15 billion dinars (\$21.6 million) for RTS was reduced to 1.67 billion (\$16.8 million) during the budget rebalance at the end of 2020, while the amount for RTV remained at the planned 900 million dinars (\$9.04 million). Citizens’ subscription costs have increased to 299 dinars (\$3) monthly for the year 2021, but this is still insufficient for the two public-service broadcasters to function independently and professionally. RTV Vojvodina, a provincial public-service broadcaster, was partially relocated to a newly built facility. However, only one-third of the

equipment was provided so that most of the television production gear, including for the news program on both channels and in all languages, still comes from the old, inadequate facility. Money to finance the new equipment was unavailable in 2020 and is not foreseen in the budget for 2021. “The public-service broadcaster is huge and has three sources of funding. It would not have survived without budget funds. The public-service broadcaster must have stable funding,” said Mihajlovic.

The activities of regulatory bodies are biased; they tend to act slowly or not at all when anomalies in the media space arise. At the beginning of 2020, the National Assembly filled two seats on the REM Council as part of the inter-party dialogue under the auspices of the European parliament. Two people were elected, but just 10 months later one of them resigned over dissatisfaction with the way the new president of the REM Council was elected.

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According to the last census in Serbia (in 2011), 2.68 percent of the population is without schooling, 11 percent has incomplete primary education, and 20.76 percent has only primary education. As such, media literacy is quite low. Only some schools have adequate media literacy education programs, and developing a critical understanding of media content is rare. There are no government-organized adult media literacy initiatives. Instead of providing people with the tools to analyze and evaluate, the government instead asks citizens to believe that decision-makers are infallible.

Data privacy is not sufficiently respected in Serbia. While Serbia adopted a law on personal data protection in 2018 that meets the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation, implementation of it has been weak. The IT sector lacks adequate skills, which was demonstrated by the establishment of the COVID-19 Information System. This system, introduced by a government decision, obligates health institutions to keep data, including location data, on people who have been tested for, diagnosed with, or treated for COVID-19, as well as those who have died. The system also contains information about contact tracing, and institutions are required to input their data daily. According to the Share Foundation, after the system was introduced, anyone could access all data because access codes were available. Similarly, in March 2020, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection announced that parents of schoolchildren frequently appeal for the Commissioner’s intervention, stating that in some schools, teachers require children to provide information on their health and their family’s health. Parents indicate that through modern electronic

means of communication (Viber, Facebook groups, emails, etc.), teachers require this information to be submitted per the school administrators or the Ministry of Education Science and Technological Development. “Legal protection exists but only on paper,” Lakicevic said. “In practice, if someone accesses your private data, you have no way to determine who did it, and state officials cannot or will not help.”

Many judicial and other regulatory bodies do not know enough about the law, so they sometimes protect data that they should not protect or reject FOIA requests.

International organizations active in Serbia are investing significant funds in digital literacy and security. As a result, positive developments are noticeable in some outlets and among journalists, but not among the general population. Additionally, new tools have emerged to defend against attacks. “I have not heard of research that measured the level of digital literacy or knowledge of how algorithms work. However, progress has been noticed on portals, which increasingly highlight data on cookies,” said Janjic.

### Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience’s needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

All media have the ability to apply quality protection mechanisms against DDOS attacks, but actual usage is unknown. Knowledge on how digital technologies and social network algorithms work is low, especially among the middle-aged and older population.

Most panelists believe that real problems are not being publicly discussed in Serbia. There is no dialogue between political parties, and even the most banal issues are not discussed at all. There is a clear divide between opinions for and against the

government. This leads to both confusion in public opinion and a general polarization of the population.

Media literacy is one of six elective subjects, of which each high school chooses four. In practice, most high schools in Serbia choose media literacy as one of those four subjects. However, in 2020, the number of schools choosing media literacy as an elective did not expand, compared with previous years. In primary schools, media literacy topics are provided for a few hours as part of other subjects, like language arts. Some of the high schools, including some gymnasiums (advanced secondary schools) that are the most numerous promoters of media literacy, have not chosen media literacy as an elective for their students due to lack of knowledge about the subject within their teaching staffs. However, there are some informal groups of students who are able to work with librarians who share an interest in media literacy.

Fact-checking portals are still underrepresented and not extensively available or adequately promoted. The initial manipulative statements, or “fake news,” have a far greater reach than fact-checking efforts and evaluations. Throughout 2020 in Serbia, the IREX media literacy program “Learn to Discern” actively trained a number of citizens. However, the program targeted the youth population, seeking participants aged 30 and younger. The Learn to Discern program also produces a podcast that discusses false news and misinformation in Serbia and beyond.

No research has been conducted that measures the level of media literacy and resistance to misinformation, though that resistance is evidently low. Citizens readily believe articles and publications from pro-government media, demonstrating a lack of media literacy skills. Several examples from 2020 reinforce this. On October 10, 2020, the pro-government tabloid *Informer* wrote that the Democratic candidate for the U.S. presidency, Joe Biden, would abolish the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina if he won. On November 22, 2020, Sputnik Srbija

published text reading: “American scientists promote the concept of eating human flesh” with the headline “YOU FEEL SORRY FOR ANIMALS, MAKE FOOD OF YOURSELF!” On June 12, several media outlets reported that a group of armed men occupied the construction site of the Islamic Center in Novi Pazar; the Ministry of Internal Affairs denied this claim a few hours later.

USAID’s Media Initiative and Partner Support Program, implemented by Propulsion Fund, offers new opportunities for news consumers. The program enhances citizens’ understanding and knowledge about key concepts, skills, and issues relevant to media, digital, and information literacy. The program partners with institutions, educators, the media, nonprofits, and the corporate sector. Programs and manuals for working with the state administration are also being developed.

Journalists and NGOs exercise the right to freedom of speech, but there are more pro-regime-oriented outlets and groups that abuse that right. The confusing media environment is systematically created, primarily through misinformation and

conscious deception. Freedom of public speech is threatened at almost all levels.

Since there are no platforms for public debates, social networks serve as the venue. Although such debates are dynamic and independent, the dialogues are often virtually destroyed by organized party activists who, through meaningless insulting or biased comments, actually stifle constructive exchange. Debate platforms rarely help to foster pluralism of opinion and ideas. Government officials are reluctant to appear in media critical of them, and opposition representatives rarely appear in pro-government media. “Public dialogue does not exist from the lowest level upwards, and that is stated in the European Commission report on Serbia. An example is a group of citizens in Novi Sad who protest against aggressive urban projects but fail to organize relevant public debates even within the local communities where these projects occur,” said

“There is a big gap and hostility between professional media that try to work responsibly, regardless of who holds the levers of power, and other professional media organizations that produce biased reporting,” explained Radojević.

Sejdinovic. “What is especially disappointing is how impossible it is to organize such a dialogue on the public-service broadcaster, which is the right place for such a discussion.”

Misinformation, malicious information, and hate speech generally dominate in public and on digital media networks. Public bodies, regulators, ombudsmen, and platform moderators do not interfere or regulate and rarely impose severe penalties, and there is no evidence to suggest that complaints are resolved in a fair and balanced manner.

The protests in July 2020, provoked by authorities’ reintroducing a curfew, demonstrated the distrust citizens have in the official data on the number infections and/or deaths during the coronavirus pandemic, as well as their disdain for the measures implemented during the first two months of the crisis. Just before the June parliamentary and local elections, all measures were completely abolished. Citizens perceived the abolishment of previous measures, coupled with the announcement of new measures, as election manipulation and believed the true number of deaths was hidden. In its report released on June 22, BIRN revealed a higher number of deaths stemming from the pandemic. Large protests as a form of civic initiatives replaced public debates on critical topics. Although large protests seemed to replay public debates, even those big protests, which were brutally broken up by the police, did not lead authorities to agree to discuss the topics that prompted the discontent. “The debates initiated on social media have not changed the behavior of the authorities, but that is why they regularly provoke orchestrated attacks on anyone who speaks differently and on every media outlet that broadcasts it,” said Isakov.

There are positive examples where media content is developed according to the needs of the audience, but panelists are not familiar with the ways in which most outlets in Serbia adapt and produce content that caters to the interests of their audience. Google Analytics is available to the portals, while larger media use the services of specialized agencies, such as IPSOS, Nielsen Audience Measurement Srbija, and TNS Medium Gallup.

Most outlets do not have the financial resources for specialized research,

so they turn to a cheaper alternative: monitoring the public attitudes themselves (for example, by monitoring the page views of articles on their sites).

The only type of research that is systematically conducted is commercial market research, which shows the ratings of individual shows but does not care about the audience, just the advertising space. “No one is engaged in systematic qualitative audience research,” explained Milivojević.

“At the daily newspaper *Danas*, we do our own research,” Cvejić said. “We analyze people’s comments and use publicly available data from various published research and analyses. We ask subscribers what they are interested in.” Tadić added, “At Radio Boom93, we work like *Danas*. We internally research what our audience would like to have on the program, and we have several analytical tools, like Google Analytics. Two years ago, we started using a tool called Content Insight, which shows what our audience follows the most. This was obtained with support from USAID’s Strengthening Media Systems (SMS) project, implemented by IREX, but most outlets cannot afford this tool. It is also wrong for local media to draw conclusions from general media research. Small local media can only increase the viewership, readership, and audience by researching their own local environment.” In the context of public funding of media projects of public interest, it was envisaged that before announcing a competition for such projects, citizens would be questioned about what media content is missing in their local area. However, in practice this was not done.

“The media very rarely publish corrections of incorrect information,” Janjic said. “With misinformation about the coronavirus pandemic, FakeNewsTracker found that only in 4.2 percent of cases did media outlets remove the disputed information from their websites when it was proven to be untrue.”

There are initiatives for cooperation between media or the nongovernmental sector and the state, but they are mostly reduced to very specific short-term goals or projects. Cooperation between media and civil society organizations (making joint gatherings, addressing

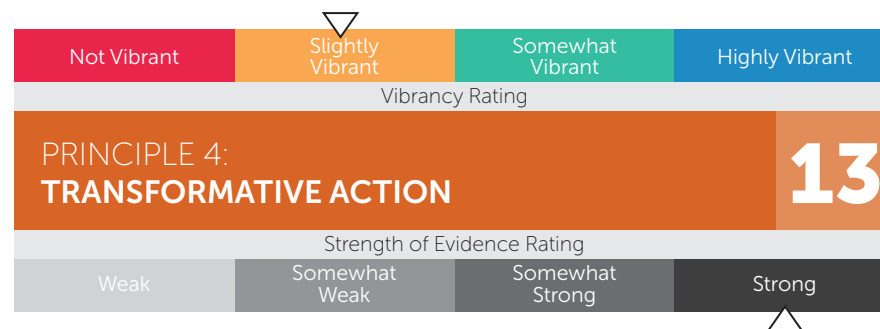
individual topics) is not rare. “There is a big gap and hostility between professional media that try to work responsibly, regardless of who holds the levers of power, and other professional media organizations that produce biased reporting. The situation is the same with nongovernmental organizations. Often the state treats certain NGOs and media as enemies and do not provide them with quality information,” explained Radojević.

Some small progress came from the Working Group on the Safety of Journalists, which was established in December 2020. One of the first decisions of this group was a binding instruction to public prosecutors to act urgently in cases where the safety of journalists is endangered. There was also some small progress in cooperating with authorities to better inform the public about the work of courts and police.

Media with all the attributes of community media do not exist in Serbia. There are mostly private media outlets in local communities that deal with the problems of local societies, but none of them are funded by local governments or citizens. There are also civil society media outlets, but they function differently from the classic “community media” and are mainly Internet portals. “Community media exist, but they are not professionally developed, and they do not have enough funds to grow into strong media,” Mihajlović said. “In Vojvodina, there are stable minority-languages media whose programs are broadcast by the public broadcaster RTV.” Šarić said, “My knowledge of community media is very limited.... For example, I know that the media that report on the Hungarian ethnic minority are focused on their needs. I know they get funding from the Hungarian government for that job, but I also know that such media often represent the interests of the government, which does not always mean true and accurate reporting.”

In Serbia, there are local newspapers, such as *Kikindske*, *Vranjske*, *Vršacke novine*, and *Kragujevac Svetlost*, that focus on issues important to the local community. There are numerous local television and radio stations, but the former are mostly under the control of the authorities, and the latter primarily broadcast entertainment programming. Citizen participation in community media funding is not enough to cover their costs.

“There is a tendency to treat nonprofit media as community media. There are some small local media that we can recognize as community media,” said Milivojević. Isakov disagreed, saying, “There are hardly any community media. Journalists and citizens have not sufficiently recognized the power and capabilities of this type of media.”



Very few citizens consume multiple sources of information, especially those from ideologically disparate camps (i.e., citizens that support the government do not consume media that criticizes the authorities and vice versa). During the coronavirus pandemic, it became apparent that people neither seek out accurate information nor use resources to distinguish fact from speculation. Panelists were very critical of the government’s use of fake information, and they argued that poor quality information does not support good governance and democratic development.

With the exception of a couple of weeklies and one daily newspaper, content in Serbia’s print media and tabloids share the same themes in their reporting as well as the approaches they take in reporting on those themes. On social media networks and portals, the picture is significantly different, but generally the political orientation for or against the government is more important than objectivity. Discussions on these platforms are often based on insults, accusations, and hate speech between citizens, and they are most often conducted through fake profiles. Nonpartisan sources of information exist, but they are more expensive or more difficult to access. People who participate in sharing information with opponents do so primarily through the social network Twitter.

### Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Since there are no debates, there is a lack of access to experts with authentic and reliable information. “We do not have access to experts, as they do not want to give statements,” Bjeletić explained. “Academics, professors, specialists, etc. avoid it so as not to be persecuted later on social media or because they are afraid of losing their jobs. Very few want to speak, so the nonpartisan sources of news, data, and information are not available to us. During COVID-19, medical experts spoke, but that is an exception.”

According to a survey conducted in October 2020 by the Atlantic Council in Washington D.C. titled “The Suspicious Virus:

Conspiracies and COVID-19 in the Balkans,” a large number of Serbian citizens believe in conspiracy theories. The survey states, “Most Serbian citizens believe that ‘pharmacomafia’<sup>2</sup> is involved in the spread of the virus, around one-third of respondents think that the Government of China produces the virus in a laboratory (i.e., that the virus fled from the Wuhan laboratory), slightly fewer respondents believe that Bill Gates is responsible for the virus, while the least of those link the pandemic to 5G technology.”

It could be said that some civil protests were based on believing truthful information. The protests themselves were a form of “debate” based on information from civic initiatives. However, not many people were involved.

<sup>2</sup> “Pharmacomafia” is a term used to describe the belief that pharmaceutical companies intentionally manufacture viruses in an effort to increase their sales of drugs as well as their profit margins.

The mainstream media, or the media with the highest viewership and readership, may provide quality information but also try to provoke emotional reactions with misinformation. Therefore, it is difficult to say that most citizens base their views on important issues on quality information. “The coronavirus pandemic has clearly shown that the media channel the behavior of citizens,” said Mihajlovic. The impact of misinformation is prominently seen during the ongoing pandemic, as many people refuse vaccinations because they believe in conspiracy theories.

The link between politicians and citizens is very weak and essentially one-way. Politicians “talk” to citizens only during the election season. The electoral system is partly to blame for that, since people vote for the party and not individuals. This means that citizens, practically speaking, do not elect their own representatives. Citizens vote for the ballot that bears the name of the leader, not future deputies and counselors.

When it comes to health, behavior is somewhat more reasonable, mostly among the middle aged (40 to 60 years old). However, as a consequence of low trust in officials, including the Medical Crisis Headquarters, during the COVID-19 crisis there were countless examples of misconduct— at sports and religious events and gatherings, the opening of shopping malls, retail events such as “Black Friday,” and campaign rallies during election season. But still, most citizens followed the medical recommendations, wearing masks and respecting social-distancing measures.

“In 2020, disinformation-based campaigns called for violence against migrants, as well as the demolition of 5G transmitters, due to the suspicion that they had a fatal impact on public health,” Janjic noted when discussing disinformation. “However, the 5G network in Serbia has not yet been established, and there are only a few experimental uses.”

More frequent civil actions and initiatives dealing with the protection of the environment and the health of citizens were noticeable in 2020, but they are still rare despite increasing citizen support. In general, Serbian citizens make life decisions based on quality information, though not political decisions.

There are numerous NGOs that cooperate well with the media and often use that cooperation to transmit information related to their missions. Some NGOs—including the Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI), Belgrade Center for Security Policy (BCBP), and the Center for Research Transparency and Accountability (CRTA)—and the media often act together in defense of their public interests.

Civil society organizations are weak, only sporadically deal with topics important to citizens, and are visible mainly on the Internet and social media platforms. The visibility of their research and activities in media is still insufficient. “As a journalist, it is sometimes difficult to get quality, clear information. For years, there has been a lack of civil society, which should improve its public relations,” said Sejdinovic.

“The mainstream media often ignore the work of CSOs, especially if their conclusions do not support policies that they more or less openly support,” added Kremenjak.

Most high ratings for the indicator examining civil society’s use of quality information are the results of the actions of long-established CSOs, primarily NGOs. In recent years, the ruling party (SNS) has established its own NGOs, largely a front for action in favor of the government. As an example, one NGO—The Council for Monitoring, Human Rights and the Fight against Corruption – Transparency—proposed legislation criminalizing the “attack on the mental integrity and tranquility of a family member of the highest state officials.” Other NGOs influence the public with their extreme right-wing and anti-vaccination views and bias toward Russia with hate speech. Diversification of civil society is underway, and the GONGO (government-organized non-government organizations) sector is expanding. “There are three groups of CSOs,” Sejdinović explained. “First, there are GONGO organizations, whose numbers are growing. Second are organizations that, due to mutual projects with authorities, blunt the critical edge and obscure real information. The third are CSOs that create and exchange quality information with the population.” Janjic added, “The leading

**“Uncovering corruption, human-rights violations, and attacks on civil rights does not lead to changes in governmental practice. The government defends its own at all costs,” Isakov said.**

CSOs are mostly oriented toward the protection of human rights. If they do not participate directly in the fight against misinformation, then, in most cases, they do not encourage its dissemination. Cooperation between the media and CSOs exists but can be improved.”

Press conferences exist, and most media are allowed, but they are mostly used as a platform for establishing narratives, agendas, and attacks through ordered questions to government officials. Media often receive incomplete and manipulative answers to their questions, and it is not uncommon for government officials not to answer questions that come from independent, professional media. Authorities often announce press conferences shortly before they start, hold them outside the cities, and do not invite all media. These press conferences are also arbitrarily organized, without a clear mechanism for journalists to know what information they can obtain. Often at such conferences, journalists are forbidden to ask questions. In 2020, the government’s COVID Crisis Headquarters held closed press conferences, without allowing for questions, or organized conferences online.

Few government actors hold press conferences. Usually, the president holds them, as well as sometimes the prime minister or other ministers. “There are not enough regular press conferences. Here in Nis, the police administration used to hold press conferences every Tuesday. Now there are no more,” said Bjeletić. “Regular press conferences have been canceled at all levels, and when one is organized, no discussions are allowed. The only exception is at the COVID Crisis Headquarters.”

The government does not consult experts or citizens but only select henchmen, disguised as experts, and institutions under their control, who confirm the already-made decisions of the government and government bodies.

Investigative media that present their findings and/or the views of civil society organizations that differ from the interests of the government and local authorities are not only unwelcome, but these entities are



also targeted as enemies. “Press conferences are scheduled ad hoc or in advance, but as a rule they are political campaigns for improving the reputation of the ruling party,” Mihajlovic said. “Copying uncritical government statements is a serious problem.” There are no political discussions and debates in Serbia. Often, facts are manipulated in order to propagate certain political agendas, and true debate is avoided.

As a rule, authorities do not pay attention to allegations from investigative media that point to corruption or systematic violations of human rights, nor do they make excessive efforts to change such practices. They primarily deal with those who present such information by accusing them of malice and advocating for the opposition. This shows that there is pressure from media, NGOs, and the public on the government in cases of corruption and violations of civil liberties, but that the system usually does not work despite the existence of independent institutions and legislation.

The government treats every criticism as an attempt to overthrow the government. “Uncovering corruption, human-rights violations, and attacks on civil rights does not lead to changes in governmental practice. The government defends its own at all costs,” Isakov said. In 2020, whistleblowers were harassed, including doctors who spoke publicly about the poor conditions in medical facilities. Reporting that prevents or reduces the frequency or severity of corruption by national or local authorities is rare. In most cases, information about instances of corruption is completely ignored or spun. “Very rarely does information about government violations lead to sanctions. One example is from Požega, where local activists discovered abuses of power from municipal leaders. The Prosecutor’s Office responded, and the perpetrators were arrested. However, there are not many such examples,” Lakicević said. No major investigation into corruption scandals revealed by investigative media in 2020 has resulted in the sanctions of those responsible or in the initiation of court proceedings. Discovered scandals are often defended with media spin. “When an outlet discovers corruption, the government reacts by attacking such media, not by attacking the case of corruption,” said Bjeletić. “On the contrary, it defends corrupt actors.”

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