



**Jahorina, 8 December 2023**

## **Press release**

### **Rising above the headlines: Protecting press freedom and strengthening the judiciary in the Western Balkans**

The second regional conference on 06-08 December 2023 in Jahorina (BiH), brought together more than 80 journalists and members of the judiciary for a dialogue on "Strengthening Media Freedom in Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia". High representatives from the judiciary participated, including Sanela Gorusanovic-Butigan, the Vice-Chair of the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sabina Sarajlija, Chief Prosecutor of the Sarajevo Canton.

The opening keynote from Guy Berger, former UNESCO Director for Freedom of Expression, addressed both the judiciary and media being indispensable pillars for a society based upon the rule of law. It was followed by an in-depth presentation by Natalija Bratuljević, an independent consultant from Serbia who recognized the fact that there is dialogue today. "Even when we disagree, we have the opportunity to sit down at the same table."

We look back on two productive days of dialogue on judicial transparency and responsible journalism in the region, and the need for the two communities to work together towards safeguarding media freedom in the region.

During the conference, the participants reflected on why police, prosecutors and judges should recognize journalism as a public good and journalists' safety as a prerogative for freedom of expression and access to information. They also reflected on the difficulties to identify perpetrators of threats and attacks on journalists, including online smear campaigns. Participants discussed how to run an effective investigation of crimes committed against journalists and to prove an intention to murder a journalist beyond reasonable doubt. They looked at what it takes to create a culture of safety at the newsroom and within the journalists' community and what can only be addressed through national safety mechanisms. They pointed out with concern the use of Strategic Litigations of Public Participation (SLAPPs) to silence critical voices.

Please see the Outcome Statement of the meeting for our vision on the way forward.



More information on our initiative:

Freedom of the media is one of the cornerstones to a well-functioning democracy, and journalists are vital watchdogs who make sure governments answer responsibly to the needs of citizens. Unfortunately, the media sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia is not always able to function safely and journalists have been harassed, attacked and killed for simply doing their job.

Our initiative **"Strengthening Media Freedom in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia"** combines training, advocacy and capacity strengthening of the judiciary and media to improve the capacity of the judicial sector to respond adequately to the threats journalists face, whilst at the same time improving the conditions under which the media operates. The Netherlands Helsinki Committee and Free Press Unlimited recognize the wide variety and diversity present in each of the participating countries, which calls for country-specific approaches. We work together with journalist associations - BH Journalists Association (BH Novinari), Association of Journalists of Macedonia (*3HM*), Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS) and the Judicial Trainings Centres - Centre for Judicial and Prosecutorial Training of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (CEST BiH), Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors of the Republic North Macedonia, Judicial Academy of the Republic of Serbia (Pravosudna Akademija). This initiative is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. As Henk van den Dool, the Ambassador of the Netherlands to Bosnia and Herzegovina, noted, "rule of law cannot exist without confidence in the judiciary and journalists are essential in breeding that trust."

To achieve our aims, the Netherlands Helsinki Committee and Free Press Unlimited work together with a number of Dutch institutional experts in this field, namely the Training and Study Centre for the Judiciary (*Studiecentrum Rechtspleging*), and the Netherlands Association of Journalists (*Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten*).

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