

SERBIA: MEDIA FREEDOM IN A STATE OF EMERGENCY

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOLLOWING THE
MFRR **SOLIDARITY MISSION TO SERBIA** IN APRIL 2025

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MEDIA FREEDOM RAPID RESPONSE



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On World Press Freedom Day 2025, MFRR observes that the situation for press and media freedom in Serbia is currently in a state of emergency. In recent months, attacks on media workers have reached levels not seen for decades, threatening independent and watchdog journalism and deepening a [long-standing media freedom crisis](#).

Threats to media freedom and pluralism have increased significantly amidst the student-led protests following the deadly Novi Sad railway station canopy collapse on 1 November 2024 and the government's heavy-handed response, during which political tensions have crystallised into new threats for journalists reporting from the streets.

Journalists in Serbia are being physically attacked, faced with death threats, exposed to dangerous accusations by high-level politicians, targeted with an array of spyware tools and harassed through orchestrated smear campaigns. These attacks are taking place in a climate of impunity for the perpetrators.

The hostile climate in which journalists operate is time-consuming and emotionally draining, compounded by the financial burden of defending themselves via legal means against abusive lawsuits aimed at silencing their work and discrediting the entire profession.

These immediate threats to the safety of journalists come atop wider pressures on independent journalism from a long-term and engrained system of media capture in Serbia, which has been thrust into the spotlight through the demands of the protest movement for democratic media reform.

To express support for Serbian journalists and hear their first-hand experiences with these increased hostilities, the partners of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) organised a solidarity mission to Serbia, visiting Belgrade and Novi Sad between 7 and 9 April.

During this mission, MFRR partners focused on meeting with journalists from both private and state-owned media, from across the political spectrum. This included journalists working in print, online, TV, radio and investigative media, including from local and regional media, as well as unions and civil society groups. In addition, the MFRR delegation met with the police, prosecution, and representatives of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Council of Europe, and the Delegation of the European Union to Serbia.

This report reflects the MFRR's findings from the mission and provides a list of recommendations. It was produced as a joint effort by all organisations which took part in the mission. We conclude that the crisis requires immediate and serious attention from national authorities, as well as the EU. Swift and concrete measures to ensure the safety of journalists and the protection of the free press must be implemented as a fundamental element of Serbia's EU accession process.

MFRR solidarity missions are an on-the-ground mission organised in response to the acute crisis of press and media freedom. Their primary aim is to express solidarity and support towards journalists and civil society, as well as hear concerns and gather evidence directly from the affected journalists and media workers. While the MFRR does not engage with domestic political actors during its solidarity missions, the consortium remains open to dialogue with the authorities and encourages post-mission meetings where we can discuss our findings and share our recommendations.

The mission was led by the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) and joined by representatives of ARTICLE 19 Europe, the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), Free Press Unlimited (FPU), International Press Institute (IPI) and the Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT). It was coordinated with support from the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS).

Quotes from some of the journalists the mission met with in Belgrade and Novi Sad have been used throughout the report to illustrate the pressures they are facing. All meetings during the mission were held under Chatham House Rule and the identity of the authors of the quotes has therefore been withheld to preserve their anonymity.



Thousands gather outside Serbia's parliament for a student-led anti-corruption rally, with press covering the events.
Credits: picture alliance / SIPA | Spasa Dakic

KEY FINDINGS

Safety of journalists

The MFRR observes that the safety of journalists in Serbia is in a state of crisis, requiring urgent action to ensure the public's free access to reliable information in the country. As of 2 May 2025, the MFRR has already [documented](#) 64 press freedom violations targeting 128 media-related persons or entities in 2025. These include eight cases of physical assault, 12 attacks on property (e.g., camera equipment), 40 verbal attacks (including death threats and smear campaigns), 14 incidents related to censorship, and five legal cases. These numbers, recorded over the first four months of 2025, demonstrate a stark increase from 2024, when the total number of incidents [registered](#) was 84 for the whole year.

Since the Novi Sad tragedy on 1 November 2024, there have been at least 60 attacks on journalists and media, including [young journalists' generation](#), for their reporting of the fatal incident and the subsequent protests that have spread across Serbia.¹ During the MFRR mission, the delegation learned that investigative journalists working in local or regional communities are likely to be more isolated and exposed to attacks, including self-censorship, both of which go unnoticed.

Among the press freedom violations recorded since 1 November, 15 attacks were initiated by government officials, including President Vučić, with dangerous public statements, inciting further online threats, smear campaigns, and physical violence. State officials do not hesitate to spread falsehoods to silence critical voices, regardless of the risk to journalists' safety. Two particularly worrying and emblematic cases are those of journalists Ana Lalić Hegediš and Dinko Gruhonjić, portrayed as political opponents by top-level officials, despite countless [death threats](#) online and beyond the screen.

“This is not new but it has escalated. There is a clear model: putting you on the front page of a tabloid, then officials target you, and then social media. Exactly the same model all the time. Even if you are not scared, it distracts you from your job. It affects friends, family”

These attacks form a part of an escalating pattern of government repression against the media and public watchdogs in Serbia, which is completely irreconcilable with the applicable European treaties and rule of law standards. MFRR highlights in particular unlawful [office raids of civil society organizations](#), arrests of journalists for [‘causing panic and disorder’](#) and [‘disturbing public order’](#), suspicious [summoning](#) of RTS employees for informative interview at the Security Informative Agency, the [arbitrary denial](#) of entry into Serbia of journalists covering student protests, and the ongoing [illegal targeting of journalists and civil society](#) with spyware. The MFRR mission was also alarmed by cases of surveillance reported by students of journalism, through incredible illegal means, as well as the disclosure of their personal information as a form of intimidation.

“We have smear campaigns, harassment coming from the top of the government, and then spreading through tabloids, we have completely ineffective mechanisms of protection, it is completely reliant on political will... we have an increase of physical attacks, of harassment campaigns and of institutional abuse, and we also have huge increase of SLAPPs”

Following the attacks from authorities and government officials on the media, Serbian journalist associations have withdrawn from the Standing Working Group on the Safety of Journalists, pointing out the lack of potential for meaningful dialogue while government actors are actively engaged in attacks against the press. Other journalists and media have faced [death threats](#) from anonymous users on social media.

1. Data recorded via Mapping Media Freedom on 16 April 2025

There is a clear disconnect between the narratives of the police and journalists. While the police cited underreporting of threats to journalists or impatience with investigations, media professionals expressed mistrust of the institutions. In many cases, journalists reported that the police failed to intervene when attacks were carried out in their presence. Troubling cases of journalists being forcibly [evicted](#) from the public Novi Sad City Assembly by private security forces, as well as [being](#) searched and locked in the conference room, were documented by the MFRR. The latest case recorded since the end of the mission [involves](#) police violence.

Additionally, journalists report to MFRR that, despite agreements and protocols established through (among others) the Standing Working Group on the Safety of Journalists, authorities regularly fail to take the required protection and investigate measures in reported cases of attacks, even when the perpetrators are clearly identified. "Ongoing investigation" became the standard response when journalists are given a reply on the status of investigations.

Degradation of media work, including smear campaigns and cyber harassment of journalists, is becoming a pattern. Countless online death threats go unprosecuted as they do not meet the legal standards to be considered direct threats, leaving journalists without safety measures. While a minority of state authorities expressed willingness to improve through training, most appear constrained by political pressure and limited resources.

“Since November 1 last year we have been under constant pressure. On social networks and in the comments section there are multiple death threats. We are not even keeping track of them... Also what’s more important is economic trouble. Since November, we have more work than ever and more audience but the downfall of revenue. There are no donors left”

As a direct result, the state of impunity for attacks on journalists has virtually become the status quo. This year marked the 26th anniversary of the murder of journalist Slavko Ćuruvija, who was killed in 1999. His killers remain at large, while his family's foundation faces legal pressure, including from individuals acquitted for the murder in 2024. As for journalist Dada Vujasinović, the circumstances of her death 31 years ago remain unsolved. June will also mark 24 years of impunity for the brutal murder of Milan Pantić, an investigative journalist for Večernje Novosti, who was shot in the head.

Their names are linked to a cycle that repeats itself when it comes to attacks on journalists: investigations are opened but never completed: In 2024, only one case concerning the attack of a journalist [led](#) to a conviction in court. During the mission, many journalists remarked that their criminal complaints about attacks did not receive a response from the prosecution and police. In cases where no prosecution was initiated, the reasons were not always clear or sufficiently motivated. As a prime example, the First Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade failed to recognise the 2023 physical attack by the co-owner of Srpski telegraf on Radar weekly journalist Vuk Cvijić as a criminal offense, citing a lack of public disorder, a prerequisite not found in law.

Abuse of spyware against journalists

Serbia is among the European countries - and the only EU Candidate Country - in which there is substantial evidence of the abuse of spyware by state authorities against journalists, according to MFRR monitoring, posing serious threats to media freedom and journalistic source protection.

On 16 December 2024, Amnesty International launched the report [“A digital prison”](#) which revealed the use of spyware by the authorities in Serbia to target multiple journalists and civil society activists. The

report documented the use of Pegasus, Predator, as well as NoviSpy, a domestically developed spyware tool, to conduct illegal surveillance of the mobile phones of journalists and civil society activists.

Spyware was used together with the forensic software Cellebrite to access the contents of the phones of those targeted by surveillance. Such a deeply intrusive form of surveillance requires strict judicial guarantees, which are lacking in Serbia as the use of spyware is not fully recognised and sufficiently regulated, and even the generic ex-ante judicial oversight can't provide sufficient guarantees against abuses. Amnesty International initially identified 13 individuals whose mobile phones were potentially affected by spyware. The impact on those subject to spyware, as reported by Amnesty International, was "[highly unsettling](#)," and for some victims, this produced a constant fear that such information could be used against them by the authorities to destroy their career or family life.

For journalists, especially those investigating corruption and organised crime, there is also the additional concern that their sources might be discovered and face risks to their lives. Other sources can be discouraged from contacting journalists for fear of being exposed. Overall, digital surveillance is leading to self-censorship by journalists in Serbia.

The reaction of the Serbian authorities has been of outright denial. The [Ministry of Interior](#) specified that the use of such forensic devices takes place only "in accordance with the law" and dismissed as "trivial sensationalism" the contents of the report. There were no reactions from the EU institutions. An indirect confirmation of Amnesty International's findings came from [Cellebrite itself](#), which, following an internal investigation prompted by Amnesty International's report, decided to "investigate each claim in accordance with [Cellebrite] ethics and integrity policies" and as a result of such investigation they decided to "stop the use of [Cellebrite] products by the relevant customers".

In the course of the following months, as awareness was raised the number of cases of spyware grew. Besides the initial 13 cases identified by Amnesty International, [one more case](#) was reported in December, following the release of the report, and two more cases were reported at the end of March, when two journalists from leading investigative platform BIRN Serbia faced an [ultimately unsuccessful spyware attack](#) using Pegasus. All these three cases were journalists. Another case was reported to the MFRR mission by one of the journalists the mission spoke to, but who wished to remain anonymous.

The MFRR mission consistently raised the issue of spyware with the main stakeholders in Serbia, including the EU Delegation. Following the release of the report, the Ombudsman's Office and Data Protection Commissioner have opened their investigations. However, given the level of state capture in Serbia, it is unlikely that these investigations will bring results. At the same time, however, a criminal case was registered with the prosecutor for a high-tech crime. The mission inquired about this specific case. The police confirmed having received the case from the prosecutor and that the case was currently being investigated, and they were gathering evidence. Neither the police nor the prosecutors were able to confirm when the gathering of evidence would be completed, as they stated that there is no strict deadline to complete the investigation. Given the lack of specific deadlines, the previous stance of the Ministry of Interior about the use of spyware and the prevailing impunity for attacks against journalists, not many expectations should be placed on the outcome of the investigation. It remains important to give high priority to the case and constantly pressure the authorities to pursue this investigation.

SLAPPs

In addition to physical attacks and intimidation, Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPPs) are a core concern of many independent journalists and media outlets in Serbia. These lawsuits, intended to silence public watchdogs including media, do not only have an intimidatory or chilling effect, but also put a heavy burden on the budgets of the affected outlets. In its 2024 [annual report](#) on SLAPPs, the Coalition



MFRR meeting with the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia, in Belgrade.
Credits: MFRR

Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE) listed Serbia in the top three countries with the highest number of SLAPPs.

The starkest example, which has been [consistently](#) flagged to the Serbian and European authorities by media freedom organizations, concerns investigative outlet KRIK, which is currently facing 18 ongoing lawsuits, eight of which were initiated by (former) public officials and government employees. These include two lawsuits filed by a [judge](#), in response to her profile on KRIK's judicial transparency database. More recently, KRIK was hit by [two lawsuits](#) from a former minister who has been charged in the case about the collapse of the canopy on Novi Sad station. The cases point at a coordinated SLAPP attack.

While KRIK is the most extreme example of (in some cases, coordinated) attempts at silencing journalists through court, many other independent outlets in Serbia are also struggling with the impact that SLAPPs have on their resources and capacity. This is evident from the ongoing monitoring of SLAPPs in Serbia by the [National Working Group for Fighting SLAPPs in Serbia](#), [MFRR](#), and [CASE](#).

During the MFRR mission, journalists from various outlets highlighted this issue. In particular, they remarked that even when they 'SLAPP-proof' themselves as much as possible through rigorous pre-publication checks and elaborate 'right to reply'-processes, there are no mechanisms - such as early dismissal, an expedited process or full cost order - in place to mitigate the impact on time and resources of the media outlet if litigants nevertheless start a SLAPP-case. This impact is felt in particular because the media in question are, in many cases, already under attack in other ways as well. A journalist remarked during the mission: *"we have received verbal and physical threats and attacks, as well as a SLAPP-suit. (...) We are at the same time also suffering from the economic situation, struggling to find advertisers and (...) funds we relied on, were cut. We have been without income for three months."*

The extreme pressure these lawsuits put on the resources and capacity of independent media to do watchdog reporting in the public interest, further underscores the urgent need for the Serbian authorities to implement effective measures to counter SLAPPs. Such measures should go beyond mere training for the judiciary and media. While training is relevant, it does not prevent the destructive impact of many of the current SLAPP-cases as it does not affect the ability of e.g. public officials and members of the judiciary to initiate SLAPPs and does not limit the costs and impact of SLAPPs on media and civil society at large.

Media capture and media legislation

Media freedom, media pluralism and independent journalism in Serbia continue to be undermined by one of the strongest systems of media capture anywhere in Europe. Political influence over private media, the state broadcaster, the system for media regulation and the system for the allocation of state advertising all remain high. These acute levels of control across the media ecosystem are long entrenched but have been brought into the spotlight in recent months amidst the protest movement and its calls for democratic media reform.

Among the results of this long-term media capture in Serbia have been persistently weak media pluralism, non-transparent and unfair distribution of state advertising to pro-government media at the expense of watchdog journalism, murky media ownership, a highly-controlled state broadcaster which largely tows the government line, and highly ineffective regulation of the media landscape, contributing to poor media ethics, the dissemination of misinformation, pro-Russian propaganda and a culture of violence, particularly from tabloid media.

The [passing of two media laws in October 2023](#) - held up by the Serbian government as an example of its commitment to media reform in line with EU standards - have yet to be fully implemented and have not resulted in an overall positive impact. While the laws did in some ways appear to represent a positive step forward in some areas, since the mission assessed that little has changed and in other areas, the law has actually allowed the government to deepen its media capture.

The inclusion of a provision in the new law which paved the way for the return of state ownership of media in Serbia - through the state telecommunications operator Telekom Serbia - has been detrimental. Media freedom groups [warned](#) at the time this would pave the way for Telekom, the only company partially owned by the state, to dominate the media landscape. Since then, Telekom, headed by government allies, has had greater freedom to both directly and indirectly acquire media, [finance takeovers of media](#) to steer them in a more pro-government direction. The recent [acquisition](#) by Telekom of Total TV and the dropping of the two channels Nova and N1, owned by United Group, from the satellite TV was cited during the mission as a negative example of Telekom's role. The new Law on Public Information and Media, despite appearing to signal progress, therefore represents a [regressive development](#) in the field of media ownership.

In the field of media regulation, the mission concludes that the critical issue continues to be the stalled election of a new oversight Council of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), the country's key media regulator. Since the adoption of the 2023 laws, the process for appointing nine new Council members has been [repeatedly delayed](#) after independent candidates [withdrew](#) from the selection process at the end of January 2025, citing numerous procedural violations. Other shortlisted candidates showed demonstrable links to the ruling SNS party and other conflicts of interest. After the mission ended, on April 28 the Committee for Culture and Information officially [annulled](#) the previous appointment process and opened a new call. While this is a positive step, the mission notes it was done only after the [blockade](#) of the headquarters of RTS by student protesters. Overall, as the appointment of Council members requires parliamentary approval, the system remains open to political manipulation.

Under its previous management, the mission heard that the REM, which was stacked with loyalists of the government, made several controversial decisions which [undermined media pluralism](#) by boosting pro-government broadcasters to the expense of independent broadcasting houses. As the REM Council also elects the Boards of Directors of Serbia's state broadcasters RTS and RTV, a pluralistic and professional Council is also vital for independent public service broadcasting. Any future political influence over the REM would represent a major hurdle to improvement of media pluralism, independent public service broadcasting and the addressing of propaganda and misinformation in Serbia.

The mission heard from multiple stakeholders that the national broadcaster, Radio-Television of Serbia (RTS), remains beset by major challenges to its independence. The broadcaster faces accusations that it demonstrates clear political bias, largely tows the government line and offers little proper scrutiny of the government or president. RTS has been at the centre of demands of the protest movement for democratic reform of Serbian media to reduce political interference. After the mission, the broadcaster faced a two-week blockade by protesters demanding the renewal of the REM Council election process. The MFRR broadly supports the need for deep and systemic reform of RTS to realign the broadcaster with its public service mission. However, the mission condemns the acts of [intimidation](#) and [doxxing](#) of individual RTS journalists by the protesters, which risks threatening their security.

In an oversaturated media market, state advertising continues to represent a major source of revenue for many media outlets, especially at the local level. However, the system for the allocation of this advertising in Serbia remains highly [problematic](#). Few enforcement safeguards exist to ensure these funds are allocated in a fair, neutral and transparent manner, and no criteria exist about how such money should be dispersed. The result is that funds from advertising contracts from state-owned companies continue to be disproportionately channelled to media seen as having an editorial line favourable to the government, distorting the market in favour of non-critical journalism and weakening media pluralism.

The system for funding at the regional and local level is even more acute than the national level, where local authorities run by the SNS operate with even less scrutiny in dispersing state money to friendly media titles. State advertising therefore continues to represent one of the Serbian government's main levers for discouraging pluralistic and critical reporting and influencing news coverage. Meanwhile, the mission heard there is still reluctance from many major private companies to advertise in independent media due to fear of potential political or economic repercussions, cutting off further potential revenue sources.

The Law on Public Information and Media's provisions on media ownership transparency have had a positive but limited impact. While media outlets must now register their ownership structure and main editors, in practice this new system does not ensure ultimate ownership is revealed, as the true owners are listed as subsidiary companies. The result is that the mission heard no feedback of an observable increase in transparency of media ownership. This is another example of how, while on paper Serbia's media laws are relatively strong, the reality on the ground is often very different.

This system of media capture is one designed and maintained by the ruling party in Serbia for the purpose of solidifying influence over the media market for political reasons. Although the Serbian government's passing of media legislation in recent years would appear to have made changes which would improve the health of the media ecosystem, the reality is that these changes either made had no major impact on unwinding media capture, and in some cases – such as the legalisation of the state media ownership via Telekom Serbia – have actually deepened media capture. This situation requires heightened vigilance from the European Union and should be recognised and addressed within future periodic EU enlargement reports.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of these key thematic findings outlined above, the MFRR outlines the following recommendations to Serbian authorities and government, Serbian political leaders, as well as the European Union, for the improvement of the landscape for the safety of journalists, media freedom, and media pluralism.

Safety of journalists

- State authorities must end all verbal pressure and dangerous smear campaigns and denigration of journalists and media outlets. Public discourse should promote respect for press freedom and the safety of media workers.
- Authorities must cease all illegal police actions against the media and journalists, including office raids
- Authorities should implement specialised training programmes for police officers and judiciary officials to improve their reactivity and ensure consistent application of protective measures focused on digital and physical safety. Sufficient funds should be allocated for this purpose.
- Authorities must improve investigation transparency and communication by proactively providing updates on journalist-related investigations. Journalists or their legal teams should not bear the burden of pursuing information.
- Law enforcement authorities should ensure accountability in safety assessments. Journalists currently receive no explanation when the Interior Ministry denies protective measures. Even if a negative safety assessment is classified as a secret document, a written summary or standardised notification form should be provided, enabling appeals without revealing sensitive content.
- Police should investigate cyber harassment and hold tech platforms accountable. Online campaigns, including spoofing and digital threats, must be thoroughly investigated. Tech platforms should be required to respond swiftly and transparently to illegal content. Any action must comply with international freedom of expression standards. The government must align its responses with the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), ensuring that platforms operate with clear procedures, transparency, and effective redress mechanisms.
- The Serbian authorities must ensure justice for the historic murders of journalists. This should include a thorough investigation into the killings of Dada Vujasinovic, Milan Pantić, and continue to work to ensure justice in the case of Slavko Ćuruvija

Spyware use against journalists

- Authorities in Serbia should conduct an independent, impartial, and transparent investigation into all reported cases of spyware, including those mentioned in Amnesty International's report. They should also ensure an effective remedy for victims of unlawful surveillance and hold perpetrators to account.
- Serbian intelligence authorities, police bodies, the Ministry of Interior, and the government should immediately provide transparent information about cyber-surveillance capabilities at their disposal and their use against journalists, as well as information about all ongoing contracts with private surveillance firms, any of which would violate the country's laws.
- The Citizens' Protector and the Commissioner for Data Protection should invite citizens to report to their offices cases of suspect use of spyware and initiate their own ex officio investigation.
- The EU should strictly monitor the progress in the investigation of spyware cases for the purposes of assessing the progress of Serbia vis-à-vis the obligations taken under Chapter 23.
- Considering the growing body of evidence of Pegasus use by Serbian authorities, NSO Group should launch an immediate internal review of any existing contracts with Serbian authorities, consider the repeated breaches of its terms of use, and swiftly revoke any existing contracts, as well as urgently review its safeguards procedures for abuse of its products by states.

SLAPPs

- The Serbian government should fully implement the anti-SLAPP standards included in the anti-SLAPP Directive of the European Union as well as the Recommendation on SLAPPs of the Council of Europe, to improve the protection of journalists and media against SLAPPs. Such standards should include mechanisms that enable SLAPP targets to request the early dismissal of a case, request damages for the filing of SLAPP suits, request a full cost-order in SLAPP cases, and request an expedited process to limit the impact of the case.
- The Serbian authorities should refrain from misusing legal proceedings against their critics and should publicly condemn and sanction the use of SLAPPs by public officials against public watchdogs, including journalists and media.

Media capture and media legislation

- The Serbian Committee for Culture and Information and parliament must ensure the new process for appointing members of the REM Council is conducted in a fair, independent and transparent process, free from political influence. Candidates should be chosen for their relevant skills, experience, proven independence and commitment to media freedom, rather than their political affiliation.
- The government must ensure the REM has the required financial resources for its administrative body to carry out its mandate in a professional and sustainable manner.
- The Serbian government should progressively align REM and Press Councils with the provisions of the European Audiovisual and Media Services Directive and with the newly adopted European Media Freedom Act (EMFA).
- When a new REM Council is appointed, its Council must ensure that its appointment process for the election of the Boards of Directors of RTS and RTV is handled in fair, non-discriminatory, professional and transparent manner, in a manner that leads to positive reform of the broadcasters and an increase in pluralistic reporting.
- Political leaders and parties must refrain from any and all political meddling in the free and independent operations of RTV and RTS to ensure that both public media broadcasters are operating in a balanced and professional manner, ensuring fair allocation of airtime to different political views and parties and adequately covering stories of public interest.
- The government should implement a system for the transparent allocation of state advertising in a fair and equitable manner, requiring up-to-date publication of all government and state advertising expenditures, disaggregated by amount and recipient on a publicly accessible platform. Publish reports on the impact of state advertising on media pluralism, including any influence or distortion of competition.
- The government and parliament should reform the Law on Public Information and the Media and the Law on Electronic Media to remove the controversial provision allowing the all full or indirect ownership of media by the state or a partly-state owned company, as foreseen in the Media Strategy.
- Political authorities should strengthen media ownership transparency requirements by updating existing legislation to include explicit requirements for the full disclosure of ownership structures and all forms of beneficial ownership.
- Authorities should improve the Media Register of the Serbian Business Registers Agency and the REM Electronic Media Registry to ensure both are better able to provide up-to-date and easily searchable information on media ownership transparency.
- All political officials and parties must refrain from all forms of undue influence on private media owners and respect the independence of all media houses, while also refraining from applying pressure on editorial policies and decisions through personal relationships or political connections.

Recommendations to the European Union

- Publicly condemn all attacks on journalists and civil society actors who receive threats, physical attacks, and legal threats as a result of their work.
- Publicly and consistently question Serbian authorities about the status of investigations of attacks against journalists.
- Publicly condemn the unlawful digital surveillance and use of spyware against journalists and CSOs and raise those in high-level meetings with senior officials, including the President of Serbia
- Consider suspending negotiations with Serbian authorities on Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) of the EU accession process until substantial and sustained reforms are made regarding media freedom, media pluralism and the safety of journalists, in line with recommendations made in annual EU Enlargement and Rule of Law reports, as well as the reports of multiple media freedom and civil society organisations

Conclusions

The MFRR mission concludes and raises alarm over the fact that media freedom in Serbia is in a crisis. While the situation for journalists' safety, media freedom, and media pluralism has long faced systemic challenges, the current situation is not business as usual. Some limited progress in elements of the media reform agenda in recent years has been severely undermined by serious threats to journalists spawning from the government's response to the student-led protests since 1 November 2024. This situation has further subverted Serbia's commitment to strengthening media freedom as part of the European Union accession process.

Moving forward, the EU, as a key player in guiding media reforms in Serbia, must do far more to directly both call out the attacks to media freedom and support free and independent journalism in Serbia, as a fundamental pillar of the country's democratic reform. Ultimately, however, the responsibility for driving forward the reform process and ensuring long-term improvements to media freedom in Serbia must come from the current administration, which must immediately cease its active attacks on media freedom, and demonstrate a clear political will to contribute to the building of a free and pluralistic media ecosystem free from political pressure and control. The MFRR remains open to scheduling online meetings with Serbian political authorities to discuss the findings of the report and discuss the recommendations.

While the authorities have a vital duty to genuinely commit to protecting journalists and ensuring they are not the source of threats, the persistent attacks and intimidation faced by media workers in Serbia also demand a strong and coordinated response from media organisations themselves.

Media organisations should strengthen internal safety measures in newsrooms and develop tailored safety protocols, including risk mitigation strategies and emergency response mechanisms. We stand ready to support the outlets in these efforts.

At the same time, MFRR would like to remind all journalists working in Serbia that it has resources available to provide [practical support](#) and [legal support](#) to media workers and media outlets. We also encourage journalists and media outlets to report threats and violations of press freedom to the [Mapping Media Freedom](#) platform via the [ReportIt](#) link, which is run by the MFRR partners. The MFRR's [Journalists-in-Residence](#) (JiR) programme can also offer temporary shelter for journalists from Serbia facing harassment and intimidation as a direct result of their work. Any journalist in Serbia with credible suspicions their mobile devices may have been targeted with spyware, and who would like to be connected with a specialised forensic lab to have their device tested, can contact mfr@ecpmf.eu. The MFRR stands in solidarity with all journalists in Serbia carrying out public interest journalism and will continue to defend media freedom in the country and contribute to the ongoing reform process.



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