

**LOCAL INSTITUTIONS  
SUSPEND THE PUBLIC,  
JOURNALISTS NOT WELCOME,  
CITIZENS IN MEDIA DARKNESS**



**ANALYSIS OF PRESSURES, THREATS AND DISCRIMINATION SUFFERED BY  
LOCAL JOURNALISTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A NEW MEDIA STRATEGY**



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**ISBN: ISBN-978-86-88303-41-5**

**Novi Sad, September 2024**

## CONTENT

INTRODUCTION.....	4
1. LOCAL JOURNALISM - ENVIRONMENT.....	5
2. DISCRIMINATION AGAINST JOURNALISTS “NORMALIZED”, PRESSURE AND ATTACKS MORE FREQUENT.....	7
3. KEY POINTS FROM IJAV COMMISSIONERS’ REPORTS.....	9
3.1.1. SUBOTICA – INSTITUTIONS IGNORE PUBLIC INTEREST, JOURNALISTS’ QUESTIONS NOT WELCOME.....	9
3.1.2. INĐIJA – JOURNALISTS ARE TARGETS OF CAMPAIGNS AND SLAPP LAWSUITS.....	13
3.1.3. BAČKI PETROVAC – DENYING INFORMATION, MOBBING AND CHAUVINIST THREATS.....	16
3.1.4. NOVI PAZAR – DISCRIMINATION, PRESSURE AND LAWSUITS.....	18
3.1.5. SENTA – JOURNALISTS LABELLED AS “TRAITORS”, “LIBERALS” AND “LEFTIES”.....	19
3.1.6. PANČEVO – SLAPP LAWSUITS AS REACTION TO CRITICAL JOURNALISM.....	22
3.1.7. DIMITROVGRAD – PRESSURE, THREATS AND POLICE REPRESSION.....	25
3.1.8. BAČKA TOPOLA – JOURNALISTS’ SOURCES ALSO TARGET OF PRESSURE.....	28
3.1.9. KRAGUJEVAC – POLITICIANS AND PHANTOM MEDIA UNITED AGAINST JOURNALISTS.....	31
3.1.10. SOMBOR – BOTS AND CYBER ATTACKS IN ORDER TO SILENCE JOURNALISTS.....	32
4. RECOMMENDATIONS.....	33

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (IJAV) has developed a network of commissioners in ten multi ethnic local communities in Serbia, with an aim to provide safety and protection of local journalists.

Following a public competition, IJAV selected commissioners in Subotica, Pančevo, Sombor, Senta, Indija, Bački Petrovac, Bačka Topola, Kragujevac, Novi Pazar and Dimitrovgrad. Their task was to react and record the cases of pressures, threats and attacks on local journalists, as well as the cases of discrimination against journalists.

Between March and June 2023, IJAV experts organized ten workshops entitled "Recognizing discrimination, exercising legal rights and sensibilization in a multicultural context" in these cities and municipalities, attended by local journalists and media workers, representatives of the police, prosecutor's office and courts, as well as the representatives of local self-governments.

When it comes to the conclusions from these workshops, most participants agreed that the journalists and media workers in local communities were more endangered than their colleagues in bigger cities, such as Belgrade and Novi Sad, and that they reported threats less frequently because they did not trust the institutions. The reason for this might be the fact that journalists are more exposed in smaller places, since they often live very close to those they report on, and they often know each other.

The workshops, accompanied by relevant training sessions, were also used to encourage local journalists to report pressures and threats and to use the mechanisms of the Permanent Working Group for Safety of Journalists to process, i.e. to register such incidents.

Furthermore, the workshops were a rare opportunity for direct contact between journalists and representatives of judicial institutions, and one of the aims was to relax those relations in order to overcome the stereotypes they have of each other.

However, it is concerning that the lowest turnout at the workshops in ten cities and municipalities was recorded among representatives of local administrations. This seems to confirm the belief existing in the media community that local information is particularly endangered and "the public has been suspended" from the work of local self-governments.

Having organized the training sessions and workshops, the IJAV commissioners recorded and reported on various forms of discrimination, pressure and threats over a period of one year (from August 2023 to August 2024) faced by the local journalists and media that perform their jobs professionally by respecting the standards and the code of ethics of journalists. Actually, the commissioners were some kind of contact points who journalists could turn to in order to report

attacks, which were followed by the reaction of IJAV in a form of providing legal advice, notifying relevant institutions, filing a criminal complaint, as well as informing the public and interested international organizations.

This publication represents an analysis of reports that the IJAV commissioners submitted quarterly in the aforementioned period.

The analysis was conducted within the scope of the project “The Resilience Network for Protection of Journalists against Discrimination and Improvement of Inter-sectoral Trust in Multiethnic Communities in Serbia” supported by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Serbia (the MATRA program).

## **1. LOCAL JOURNALISM - ENVIRONMENT**

Apart from the extremely difficult financial position, poor technical equipment and unpredictable financing of local media, as exemplified by research conducted by IJAV published in the “Community Media on the Verge of Existence, Public Interest in Danger”, local journalists also face various types of pressure, threats, attacks and discrimination – much more than media workers in bigger cities. This is also confirmed by the IJAV commissioners’ reports published last and this year, by other members of the media community in Serbia, as well as by increasingly frequent reactions of international organizations, which warn about the endangered safety of journalists in Serbia.

The editorial boards of local media who do their job professionally are often very small, comprising as few as two or three employed journalists, they mainly rely on project financing, especially from abroad, while they normally do not receive budget funds at competitions for public information, since the regime sees these media as “unsuitable”, or they receive very small amounts. Also, because they have been labelled as the “enemies” of the regime, simply because they report critically about the decision-makers, these media companies are avoided by commercial advertisers, since they are afraid it would have a negative impact on their businesses.

This is the environment in which local journalists, who adhere to professional standards, work, which is why they are both discriminated against by local institutions and exposed to various types of pressure and threats. Next, the targets do not always recognize discrimination until it becomes evident and when they do recognize it, they are reluctant to report it because they do not trust the institution, or they are now aware of the existence of legal mechanisms.

This discrimination, especially when it comes to withholding information of public interest that is relevant to the work of local institutions and the quality of services such institutions provide to

citizens, has fatal consequences on the quality of providing information to local communities. Namely, the citizens are thus deprived of information of public importance, because only the media content served by decision-makers through pro-regime media platforms is available to those people.

Furthermore, the public labelling of professional journalists and media that provide critical reports ruins the trust of citizens in responsible journalism and the importance of such journalism for preservation and protection of basic human and civil rights, the rule of law and the control of government.

Apart from that, the work of local journalists is often brushed aside when it comes to a wider media community as well, since public information in Serbia is largely centralized, so local topics very rarely and with great difficulty reach a wider audience, which makes the engagement of local journalists and media less visible. What is more, the problems they face are not adequately presented, nor recognized when strategic media documents are adopted. One of the existing legal mechanisms for recognizing discrimination against journalists is the Permanent Working Group for Safety of Journalists, established in 2017, based on the Agreement on Cooperation signed by journalists' and media associations, the Serbian Public Prosecutors Office and the Ministry of Interior. The Permanent Group has appointed people in charge of coordinating activities in case of criminal acts that journalists might be exposed to – so called contact points, which local journalists know little about, as revealed by this project of IJAV, as well.

This system of contact points includes a contact person, who is a journalist, from each association that signed the agreement. If a member of any association believes a criminal act has been committed against them, they can get in touch with their relevant contact person twenty-four seven and report the incident. After that, the contact point from the association gets in touch with the relevant contact points at the police and the prosecutor's office. This procedure was introduced with an idea to accelerate the proceedings.

Apart from the system of contact points, there is also a call center available to journalists twenty-four seven, which not many journalists knew about. The aim of the training sessions and workshops organized by IJAV was to help local journalists familiarize themselves more thoroughly with their rights, as well as with the representatives of the prosecutor's office and the police in their areas, in order to build a relationship of trust between them and the institutions.

The work on the media laws within the scope of creating the Serbian Media System Development Strategy until 2025 was based, among other things, on the findings, attitudes and suggestions of media representatives. Last year's research by the Association of Local and Independent Media Local press, part of the Media Freedom Coalition, showed that the attitude of most people employed at local media was that the implementation of media laws was not in line with their concrete needs and that the local media were in a much less favorable position



in comparison to those with nation-wide coverage.

It is necessary to create a network of local journalists and the media community when it comes to alarming the public regarding the consequences of the pressure on journalists and in terms of formulating strategic media documents, which would allow local journalists to improve their social conditions and to successfully deal with discrimination.

## **2. DISCRIMINATION AGAINST JOURNALISTS “NORMALIZED”, PRESSURE AND ATTACKS MORE FREQUENT**

The reports of IJAV commissioners unambiguously indicate that the main generators of discrimination against journalists in Serbia are public officials and officials of the ruling political parties. Those who find inspiration in the officials' labeling to threaten, pressure and attack journalists most often remain unpunished, which sends a message to the public that bullying journalists is unpunishable, if not desirable. Furthermore, the reports also indicate that there is a lack of adequate response from the media community, that there is no mutual support and solidarity among colleagues in local areas or in a wider media community.

The attacks on journalists culminated in the first half of this year, in March 2024, with mass threats and pressures on local journalists, especially in Vojvodina, and the unprecedented campaign against the leaders of the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina, program director Dinko Gruhonjić and executive manager Ana Lalić.

This campaign against local journalists is also confirmed in the reports of the IJAV commissioners' network.

An incident in Inđija stands out, when the security at the municipality hall, assisted by the employees at the mayor's office, physically assaulted the journalist from In Media, Verica Marinčić. After being pushed and dispossessed of her phone, the journalist was literally thrown out of the building. The whole incident was recorded by the TV cameras of N1, which is the only reason why a wider audience had an opportunity to see it.

At the same time, the website of the SOinfo portal from Sombor was exposed, for one week, to serious DDoS cyber-attacks, following the release of an article about malfeasances of local powerful people.

In Novi Sad, a TV N1 journalist Ksenija Pavkov and a journalist from the local radio station and portal 021 were verbally abused because of the way in which they had reported about the protests organized in front of the Social Welfare Center because a negligent mother had her children taken away from her. The journalists received threats from the protestors, and the death

threats and most horrible insults kept coming in the days after the protest.

Death threats were also sent to a journalist from Stara Pazova, Gordana Momčilović Ilić. She was threatened by a person close to a local investor, unsatisfied with a text in which illegal activities were revealed.

Journalists Imre Tot from Subotica also experienced something similar, while trying to report from the court.

During the analyzed period of one year, local journalists in Subotica mostly complained about the discrimination coming from the local authorities. Namely, the journalists were removed from the mailing lists from which they used to receive updates on the activities of local authorities, and they would simply not receive any answers to the questions they had submitted to the institutions. Also, they were often exposed to verbal threats, but they did not seek protection, since this type of communication in public has almost been “normalized”.

In Indija, because of their critical opinion, local journalists are met with the resistance of the representatives of institutions, and they are often exposed to verbal abuses and threats, which confirms not only the arrogant attitude of decision-makers towards public criticism, but also that there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the importance of the right to public information and the transparency of the work of institutions. Furthermore, there are registered examples of pressure being put on journalists’ sources, SLAPP lawsuits being filed in order to put pressure on the media and to silence them, as well as of direct threats to physical safety and labeling of journalists as traitors.

“The journalist has never received official answers to the questions, which exemplifies the way in which this local self-government has, for years, been endangering and hindering the work of journalists who seek answers to the questions of public interest in this local area” is a poignant statement in a report submitted by the IJAV commissioner from Bački Petrovac. The local journalists in this municipality are facing mobbing, verbal threats, as well as chauvinist messages, which instigate religious and national hatred.

In Novi Pazar, apart from the fact that the institutions traditionally ignore the local media, there was an example of a second instance court ruling in which, contrary to the ruling of a first instance court, a local official won his case against several media for an alleged damage to reputation.

The local journalists from Senta also mention being ignored by the local institutions and organizations close to the regime and they emphasize the psychological pressure they are exposed to by their “colleagues” working at some of the media controlled by the ruling party.

Local institutions do not allow professional media and journalists insight into the work of these institutions, according to the reports from Pančevo. There are many examples of journal-



ists being exposed to pressures and threats coming from various sectors in this city, but not only from those in power, which suggests that the culture of dialogue and critical opinion is being demolished. Also, there is a rising number of court proceedings in which journalists are either defendants or plaintiffs because of the threats and labeling they are exposed to, with SLAPP lawsuits becoming increasingly frequent.

The local journalists in Dimitrovgrad are exposed to pressures and threats with a nationalistic connotation, mostly sent via social networks. Also, the institutions constantly discriminate against the journalists, who are also traditionally overlooked when the budget funds for local information are allocated.

Along with the local journalists from Bačka Topola, those exposed to pressure from the local institutions include the citizens who communicate with “unsuitable” media and tell them about their problems, which is the latest trend faced by local media and which further hinders their access to information, i.e. communication with citizens.

During the previous year, there have been reports of ruling parties and regime(party)-run media putting pressure on independent journalists in Kragujevac. The division into suitable and unsuitable journalists is also present in this city.

There is nothing new in Sombor either: pressure is a daily occurrence in the work of local independent journalists. The forms of pressure vary and include anonymous phone calls, party bots who belittle independent media on social networks, as well as serious cyber-attacks. IJAV has been informing the public and international community about all the incidents where local journalists were targets, which resulted in reactions of numerous international organizations, which warned the authorities in Serbia that they should provide conditions for unobstructed work of journalists and instigate proceedings against those who endanger them.

### **3. KEY POINTS FROM IJAV COMMISSIONERS’ REPORTS**

#### **3.1.1. SUBOTICA – INSTITUTIONS IGNORE PUBLIC INTEREST, JOURNALISTS’ QUESTIONS NOT WELCOME**

*Analysis of the reports submitted by the IJAV commissioner from Subotica, Mirana Dmitrović, editor-in-chief of the Magločistač portal, founded by the “Centar građanskih vrednosti” (CGV) (Civil Values Center)*

The IJAV commissioner from Subotica Mirana Dmitrović documented numerous and various cases of pressure, threats and discrimination, which were all on the rise during the analyzed period.

During 2023, the key problem for the work of local journalists and media that report professionally was discrimination imposed by the government institutions, i.e. public companies. The most common manifestations of discrimination were not providing particular journalists and media with information regarding the activities of institutions and not providing answers to journalists' questions. This abnormal practice of ignoring professional journalists and media has been established as a rule, which goes against the public interest and the legal obligation to work transparently.

The first case of discrimination recorded by the IJAV commissioner from Subotica Mirana Dmitrović in March 2023 is rather indicative and illustrative. Namely, when a journalist from the Vesti 024.rs portal, Branko Žujović, was exposed to pressure and discriminated against by the highest ranking local officials, following a press conference of the Mayor Stevan Bakić held on March 7, 2023 and attended by all members of the Subotica City Council and City Administration. He told the IJAV commissioner that he had been exposed to unpleasantness because of the "starter affair", related to the work of the Subotica-trans public company. He says that Bakić stated at the press conference that Žujović was not a journalist, because he sometimes quoted unnamed sources, but the mayor never said what might be untrue in the reports written by this journalist.

Another example of discrimination by state institutions was recorded by the commissioner from Subotica on June 2, 2023. Several journalists, including the journalists from Magločistač, a journalist from Szabad Magyar Szó and Családi Kör and others, were discriminated against by being removed from the mailing lists used by the local institutions to inform the media and journalists about their activities and by being denied answers to the questions they had addressed to the institutions, which completely ignored the journalists.

"The journalists are deprived of answers to their questions and Magločistač is not on those mailing lists. The editor-in-chief of Hrvatska riječ, Zlata Vasiljević, told the IJAV commissioner that the journalists from this newspaper asked the Ministry of Interior whether those with dual citizenship could apply for a job at the Ministry, what the requirements were, etc. No answer was received two months later. In June, a journalist did not receive an answer from the Provincial Secretariat for Education regarding the concert of Baja Mali Knindža in a village near Subotica..." are just some of the examples listed in the report compiled by the IJAV commissioner from Subotica.

The same trend was documented in August, September and October 2023: the Magločistač portal was denied an answer from Vode Vojvodine to the question related to irrigation. On August 18, 2023, the same portal was denied an answer to the question regarding the number of immigrants at the reception center in Subotica, despite numerous e-mails and phone calls. A journalist from the Hungarian portal Szabad Magyar Szó, Margaret Tomo, was denied answers by Bálint Pásztor (SVM), then-president of the Subotica City Assembly to the questions regarding the violation of

legal deadline for organizing election for the members of the local community council on the territory of the city of Subotica. The Infrastruktura železnice public company never answered journalists' questions regarding the problems of the citizens living in Kosovska Street in

Subotica, who were cut off from the city center because of the construction of a high-speed railroad and who requested that a by-pass be built. The same questions were also ignored by the local authorities.

The path that journalists have to take when communicating with certain institutions is often absurd. Namely, to receive information from the local cadaster office, they have to send a request to the Republic Geodetic Authority (RGZ), who need to grant permission to the representatives of the local cadaster office to communicate with media/journalists.

This was an answer from RGZ regarding one such query, "The Republic Geodetic Authority and all cadaster offices operate in line with the current legal regulations of the Republic of Serbia and this case you wish to write about is no exception. However, because of the unpleasant experience we have had, we have decided that the employees at RGZ and cadaster offices can only participate in live shows and cannot issue statements that are not broadcast live. That is the reason why we cannot grant you a permission to talk to the head of the cad aster office in Subotica".

This is not the only example of such behavior. On the contrary, the rule is that a centralized system manages imposes a position of inferiority on most local institutions, which is, in turn, used as an excuse for depriving media and journalists of information that might not be to the ruling parties' liking.

Following a complaint made by a journalist working at a TV station in Subotica (a pro-regime media outlet), who wished to remain anonymous, the IJAV commissioner from this city recorded a case of verbal abuse and assaults she was exposed to after reporting from a press conference of one of the sports clubs in Subotica.

"She had written an article that the club president did not like, so he abused her at the next press conference in front of her colleagues. She did not want to make public statements regarding the incident, but she also did not remove her article, which had been written in a professional manner. Among the present journalists, mostly men, only one stood up for her, while others remained silent, probably to avoid conflicts with the club president", writes the IJAV commissioner.

Verbal abuse and assaults on journalists are not rare, especially in local and small areas. Journalists typically do not seek protection from it, either because of fear or because this type of communication in public has been "normalized". However, this case indicates the integrity crisis among journalists and a lack of solidarity among them, which also significantly endangers the

public interest and the citizens' right to public information.

In October 2023, the IJAV commissioner recorded an instance on pressure on the Danas daily correspondent from Subotica, Julijana Patarčić imposed by a local official from the Party of Freedom and Justice (SSP), Robert Šebek. Julijana Patarčić told the IJAV commissioner that, after she had published a press release issued by the SSP branch office in Subotica regarding the sale of the military barracks by the state in 2015, where SSP provided certain information, including the names of businesspeople they were mentioned as the new owners, she had experienced inconvenience. "Since SSP failed to provide evidence for their claims, the journalist thought it would not be right to mention the names of the incriminated people, otherwise she would have to investigate the topic, so she just stated the facts and summarized the press release, while other media published the names, but under the quotation marks, thus quoting SSP. Soon after, she received a phone call from the president of the SSP branch in Subotica Robert Šebek, who asked her if she had been pressured by the editorial board to remove the names from her article. She answered that she believed she was not obliged to publish the names of those people, since there was no evidence for claims made in the release."

According to the same report, in October 2023, there was another case of discrimination, this time against journalist Natalija Jakovoljević, who was denied answers to her questions addressed to the Hungarian National Council (MNS) regarding the media strategy compiled by this body, which was aimed at the media and journalists reporting in the Hungarian language.

"The questions were related to the received complaints submitted by certain independent media, which we ultimately received from the very same media that were complaining about the strategy. However, we did not receive any answer from the Council regarding which complaints and objections had been accepted and applied in the future strategy and which ones were rejected and why."

Similar examples of discriminatory attitude of MNS towards independent journalists were also registered in November and December 2023.

In May 2024, the commissioner registered a case of discrimination against the Magločistač portal, which did not receive press releases from two political parties: the Alliance of Bačka Bunjevac (SBB) and the Democratic Alliance of Croats in Vojvodina (DSHV), regarding their boycott of the elections and submission of an electoral list for local elections, even though this site follows the activities of both parties. Instead, the parties only provided information to selected media outlets.

Furthermore, in May, the editor-in-chief of the Atlatzso Vajdasag investigative portal Virag Đurković reported to the IJAV commissioner that she had been denied answers to the questions she had submitted to the Government of Serbia (the General Secretariat of the Government).

In June 2024, there was a report submitted by journalists Margareta Tomo of pressure on Szabad Magyar Szó. It was stated that the president of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (SVM) Bálint Pásztor verbally assaulted her and humiliated independent journalists reporting in Hungarian on his Facebook page. “On June 4 and 5, this media outlet published an analysis of the results of SVM at local elections held on June 2, which Pásztor apparently did not like, so he wrote a post on his Facebook page, stating the following, “In the past several days, you could read various stuff written by anti-fans, i.e. so-called ‘independent, objective, investigative’ journalists. I understand, one needs to serve their master and create a horrible atmosphere in the community, but my dear ‘investigative reporters’, you should at least pay some attention to the fact. There are rules to be followed in journalism.’ There was also a comment made by the newly elected president of the Assembly of Vojvodina, Bálint Juhász, who said, ‘If they tell you what to write, it’s not important to conduct a deep analysis, it’s not important to base your analysis on actual numbers... You’ve finally put things in the right context.’”

IJAV reacted with a public statement, warning the SVM officials and other public officials that such pressure on journalists is not permitted.

In July 2024, the IJAV commissioner from Subotica registered an anonymous complaint from a journalist who complained about the discriminatory attitude of the Subotica community health center.

“A journalist from an editorial board in Subotica, who wished to remain anonymous, said that the Subotica community health center, had never answered his questions regarding the work of their doctors and that this institution was completely closed to journalists’ questions. He added that he found it frustrating that ‘certain media outlets are allowed access to certain information that other journalists have no access to’, and that if they did find out something or reach some information, it remains unofficial, since there is nobody who can confirm it, so, in most cases, it cannot be used when writing articles”.

### **3.1.2. INĐIJA – JOURNALISTS ARE TARGETS OF CAMPAIGNS AND SLAPP LAWSUITS**

*Analysis of the report submitted by the IJAV commissioner from Indija, Miodrag Blečić, editor-in-chief of IN medija portal, published by Epicentarus Multimedija According to the reports by the IJAV commissioner from Indija, Miodrag Blečić, there are numerous examples of discrimination, as well as threats that professional journalists are exposed to in Indija.*

In June 2023, the editor-in-chief of the IN medija portal, Verica Marinčić, was exposed to

discrimination by the head of the Inđija put public company, Uroš Trifunović, who told her he would not answer her question, because “she wraps it up so that she can criticize and, thus, harm the reputation of this public company”. This example, apart from clearly demonstrating discrimination against this journalist, also shows the resistance among representatives of institutions towards critical opinion and fundamental misunderstanding of the importance of the right to public information and transparency of the work of institutions. In July of that same year, Verica Marinčić was again exposed to discrimination, when an official from the municipality, Nikola Došen, prevented her from reporting from one concert, although she had dutifully showed her press identification card.

In July 2023, journalist Željko Bogojević from Srbobran was a target of threats by an official from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Srđan Kružević, who sent a message on Instagram, saying that he was “calling all Bogojevićs, Grujićs and other unknown heroes” to “administer justice” onto him before they “administer God’s justice and lynch” onto the members of his party.

In October 2023, the IJAV commissioner from Inđija recorded a discriminatory attitude of the president of the municipality of Inđija towards independent media and journalists, because he refused to answer the questions related to the allocation of budget funds for co-financing projects in the field of public information.

The president of the municipality of Inđija, Vladimir Ganije, refused to answer the questions asked by a journalist from IN medija regarding how the money would be allocated, nor did the head of the financial department at the municipality answered the question related to the availability of information of public importance. This case led to the reaction of journalists’ associations IJAV and IJAS, which also requested access to information, but never received an answer.

In January 2024, there was a case of pressure on the sources of information at InN Medija: “IN medija wrote about the children who had been working at the KC café without a contract and who received cash and who were told that if they wanted to be legally employed and registered, they would have to join SNS. The head of KC called the children on the phone and asked them why they had decided to turn to the media.”

In March, the commissioner reported a case of physical assault on journalist Verica Marinčić in the building of the municipality of Inđija, which was followed by a public reaction of IJAV and a filed criminal complaint.

“INmedijajournalistVericaMarinčićwasphysicallyassaultedonMarch4,2024,inthebuilding of the municipality of Inđija, from which she was reporting on the protest organized by the citizens of Čortanovci because their rail station had been shut down. She was physically assaulted by a security guard, who pushed her out of the municipality building. The journalist



was questioned by the police and she gave an official statement. After that, Verica Marinčić also gave a statement to the relevant prosecutor's office in Stara Pazova.”

A criminal complaint because of a physical assault on journalist Gordana Momčilović was filed in the same month. The complaint was filed by the wife of the owner of an illegally built makeshift facility in Inđija.

In May 2024, the journalists from IN medija were under pressure of the local authorities because they had published a news report stating that the president of the municipality of Inđija, Vladimir Gak, organized a reception for the members of the Sensei karate club, where he handed out gifts to the medal-winners, mostly children, containing Fruškogorski skočko honey for sexual potency in the bags branded with the municipal logo.

Although the local self-government did not deny the children were given honey for sexual potency, but actually presented the public with a product label that clearly states the honey is used as an aphrodisiac, what followed was a campaign against the journalists from IN medija, who were insulted on the municipal Facebook platform “Sistem 48” and dubbed “so-called journalists from the so-called independent portal, whose aim is to discredit all those who are not like-minded. Furthermore, a statement by the president of the Municipality of Inđija was released, in which he insulted the IN medija journalists, stating they were publishing “nonsense” and accusing them of engaging in “political clashes” through children. In his statement, however, Vladimir Gak did not refute that controversial gifts had been given to the children, but instead claimed that “the president of the municipality does not prepare gifts for his guests” and that his associates were in charge of that.

After these public statements, pressure was put on the citizens who had communicated with IN medija, the parents were questioned to find out who provided the media outlet with the information about the gifts in questions, which is why the parents felt afraid. The head of the municipality announced lawsuits and soon after, in April, the media outlet received SLAPP lawsuits in which a number of parents asked for between RSD 200,000 and 400,000 for the alleged child abuse.

Six lawsuits were received and IN medija is defended by the legal representative of IJAV, attorney-at-law Veljko Milić. It is presumed that the president of the municipality pressured the parents into filing these lawsuits.

At the end of June, IN medija received another SLAPP lawsuit because of the text related to Skočko honey for sexual potency. This brings the total to seven lawsuits for the same article. Once again, the lawsuit was filed by the parents and the total amount requested from IN medija is now around RSD 1.6 million.

Also, according to the report by the commissioner from Inđija for June 2024, journalist received a serious threat on social networks because of her professional reporting. “At the be-

ginning of June, Verica Marinčić received a message on her private Facebook account from certain Dragan Gerujić, which stated the following, ‘Ustasha activist and agent who bears a grudge against Serbia. Serbs, come round and grab the Ustasha by the neck, because their mouths are full of shit’”.

### **3.1.3. BAČKI PETROVAC – DENYING INFORMATION, MOBBING AND CHAUVINIST THREATS**

#### *Analysis of the report submitted by the IJAV commissioner from Bački Petrovac Vladimira Dorčova Valtnerova, founder and editor-in-chief of bilingual portal Storyteller*

The IJAV commissioner from Bački Petrovac, Vladimira Dorčova Valtnerova, records in the first period, during the second half of 2023, a discriminatory attitude of local authorities towards journalists who ask questions of public interest. As a typical example, she mentions a question addressed to the president of the municipality of Bački Petrovac, Jana Šproh, regarding the consequences of natural disasters in the town and the jurisdiction of the municipality in this field.

“The journalist never received official answers, which is an example how this local self-government has been hindering the work of journalists who look for answers to questions of public interest in this local community,” states the IJAV commissioner in her report.

As another example of discrimination, she mentions the case of Storyteller journalist Sanja Đorđević regarding the use of available mechanism for access to information of public importance – a complaint to the commissioner. Namely, on August 4, 2023, the journalist sent a request for access to information of public importance to the Municipality of Bački Petrovac related to the implementation of the project Program for Improving Employment and Employment Opportunities for the Young in the municipality of Bački Petrovac in 2021 -2023, when the municipality failed to adhere to the legal deadline of 15 working days since receiving the request for access to information of public importance. Only after she had sent a complaint to the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance on August 29, 2023, did the journalist receive official replies from the municipality on September 19, 2023.

In September 2023, the IJAV commissioner from Bački Petrovac recorded another example of discrimination by the local authorities and the Ministry of Interior. “On September 19, 2023, the journalist sent inquiries to the official e-mail addresses of the Municipality of Bački Petrovac, the Municipal Council of Bački Petrovac, Komunalac Bački Petrovac public utility company and the Ministry of Interior of Serbia – Traffic Police regarding speeding violations in the village of Maglić in the municipality of Bački Petrovac, in a street with the

speed of limit of 40 km/h. The journalist never received official replies to her questions from any of the aforementioned institutions/companies.”

In November 2023, there was a case of labelling and verbal assault on the Storyteller journalists Ana Beređi and Sanja Đorđević, who were conducting a survey among the citizens about how much they knew about the existence of the institution of the local commissioner, when one of the interviewees, a member of SNS, publicly labelled them as journalists from an editorial board that “does not report objectively” by saying, “What media do you work for? Storyteller? That’s Vladimira’s outlet that does nothing but slags off the ruling party”. After this unpleasant incident, he agreed to participate in the survey.

The commissioner also records a case of discrimination against Storyteller by the local self-government, which provided the requested information only after the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance had received a complaint.

“In September 2023, the journalist requested access to the information of public importance by sending an email to the Municipality of Bački Petrovac regarding the implementation of the Program for Improving Employment of the Young in the Municipality of Bački Petrovac in 2021-2023. The official replies to these questions were never sent to the journalist and that is an example of how the local self-government has been hindering and disturbing the work of journalists who look for the answers to question of public interest in this local community. However, the editorial board/journalist used the mechanism of complaining to the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and finally received an official reply from the municipality in mid-November.”

Furthermore, the report states that in November 2023, a journalist from Storyteller sent questions to the official e-mail address of the National Council of Slovak Ethnic Minority regarding an affair related to potential construction/purchase of a building for the future Center for Vojvodina Slovaks and which started in 2021. “The journalists never received any official reply, but she did not exercise her right to request access to information of public importance. This affair eventually concluded, and the potential construction of the Center turned into a fiasco. In March 2024, the IJAV commissioner from Bački Petrovac documented a case of mobbing reported by a journalist from a local media outlet, who wished to remain anonymous. “A journalist from a local media outlet in Bački Petrovac, who wishes to remain anonymous, reported that the owners of the outlet in which is employed, who are close to the Serbian Progressive Party, are pressuring him regarding his reporting and suggesting/ordering him to report positively on all topics they choose. At the same time, he says that they are mobbing him, but he does not wish to provide any details to the public.”

In April 2024, there was a serious threat, which caused both a public reaction and a criminal complaint for causing racial, national and religious hatred.

The Storyteller editorial board conducted an anonymous survey in which they examined the biggest problems in the local self-government (Bački Petrovac, Kovačica, Stara Pazova and other self-governments where Slovaks live) and one respondent wrote that “Slovaks are the biggest problem, because they smell like sausages” and that “there are too many of them”, adding that this “problem” could be solved with “a military intervention” and by “expulsion” and that “the solution to this problem lacks assimilation instruments”.

In July 2024, the commissioner from Bački Petrovac was approached by a local journalist, asking for help with copyright to a show, and the IJAV lawyer provided suitable legal advice.

### **3.1.4. NOVI PAZAR – DISCRIMINATION, PRESSURE AND LAWSUITS**

*Analysis of the reports submitted by the IJAV commissioner from Novi Pazar, Nikola Kočović, journalist at Sto plus radio*

In August 2023, a journalist from the SNEWS portal from Novi Pazar, Medin Halilović, was exposed to discrimination by the City Administration. According to the IJAV commissioner from Novi Pazar, Nikola Kočović, the SNEWS portal has been exposed to discrimination by the local officials for years, since they ignore the portal’s requests to be included in the mailing list with other registered media outlets, so that they could receive information, releases and other content regarding the work and activities of the local government institutions.

Furthermore, in August 2023, the IJAV commissioner documented a verdict issued by the Court of Appeal in Belgrade against the journalists from Radio Sto plus and the Beta news agency, following a lawsuit filed by a local official from Novi Pazar.

The Court of Appeal in Belgrade reversed the second acquittal issued by the High Court and ordered the director of Sto plus radio, Ishak Slezović, editor Nikola Kočović and Beta news agency to pay compensation for non-material damage to the former deputy mayor of Novi Pazar and official of the Serbian Progressive Party, Igor Novović. Pursuant to the verdict of the Court of Appeal, Kočović, Slezović and Beta news agency, which owns Sto plus radio, to pay over RSD 210,000 together for the fine and court costs.

“A civil procedure, while started in 2017, had two verdicts by the High Court in Belgrade, in which Kočović, Slezović and Beta were acquitted of charges related to damage to honor and reputation of Novović. Novović filed a criminal complaint against Kočović with the Basic Court in Novi Pazar, and after the verdict in favor of the journalist, the statute of limitations ran out

during the appeal proceedings. Those employed at Sto plus are convinced that the lawsuits and the verdict that followed the first three which were in their favor, are a form of pressure on one of the few free and independent media in Sandžak,” it is stated in the report by the IJAV commissioner, who added that, in the meantime, the fines were paid with the help from Free press unlimited, while the legal representative of the outlet filed a complaint to the Supreme Court of Cassation.

In March 2024, the commissioner documented discrimination related to the allocation of budget funds for local media outlets and legal advice was provided in this matter.

“Since the introduction of project media co-financing, RTV Novi Pazar has been the supreme champion when it comes to the money awarded by the Municipality of Novi Pazar and the Ministry of Information. Unsatisfied because this year again most money (over 80%, i.e. 32.2 million out of 39 million in total) was again granted to this TV station, six media outlets decided not to accept the funds allocated to them (around 3.5 million in total), thus pointing out the discriminatory attitude that has existed for years, as well as the unequal and unfair allocation of funds from the city budget.”

### **3.1.5. SENTA – JOURNALISTS LABELLED AS “TRAITORS”, “LIBERALS” AND “LEFTIES”**

*Analysis of the report submitted by the IJAV commissioner from Senta, Peter Kokai, journalist and founder of the Sloboda štampe foundation*

In the period between August 1 and October 15, 2023, the IJAV commissioner from Senta, Peter Kokai, documented 11 cases of discrimination against journalists by local institutions. “In the period between August and September 2023, there were 11 cases where the bodies of the local self-government of Senta, institutions and organizations associated with the self-government did not invite representatives of independent media to their official and public events. From the list of invitees, it is obvious that representatives of all media (both Hungarian and Serbian, both state-owned and privately-owned), except those established by the Sloboda Štampe Foundation. Among the event, there were some that were of absolutely vital public importance, such as the commemorative session of the Assembly of the Municipality of Senta on the occasion of the Day of the City or a regular session of the Senta Municipal Assembly,” it is stated in the report by the IJAV commissioner.

In the period between October 1, 2023, and January 31, 2024, the IJAV commissioner from Senta registered eight cases of discrimination, where the bodies of the local self-government of

Senta failed to invite representatives of independent media to their official and public events. “The local self-government still invites to the sessions of the Municipal Assembly of Senta only those media that are under direct or indirect control of the ruling parties and the same pattern is applied when it comes to various other events, which are of historical importance to the whole Hungarian community in Vojvodina.”

The IJAV commissioner estimated that was a case of tendentious efforts on behalf of the local self-government in Senta to keep representatives of independent media as far as possible from their events, with one exception being pointed out. Namely, the Cultural Institute of Hungarians in Vojvodina (with headquarters also in Senta) still regularly sends invitations to representatives of independent media, as well.

As a new occurrence, he registered the fact that state bodies in some cases do not invite representatives of independent media to their public events, mentioning the European Day of Justice, organized by the Basic Court in Senta, as an even that the media founded by Sloboda štampe foundation were not invited.

“The analyzed period is also the period of the election campaign and the elections. The media founded by the Sloboda štampe foundation (Családi kör weekly, portals in Hungarian and Serbian Szabad Magyar Szó and Slobodna reč) regularly sent their questions to all political protagonists from Hungarian parties and offered the same space for their answers, and the only party that did not send any reply was the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (SVM), which showed that they both ignored the effort and the existence of independent press, as such.” Legal advice was also provided regarding the approach towards the bodies that discriminate against the media outlets in question.

Furthermore, the report also points out a new aspect of discrimination and psychological pressure on journalists of the aforementioned media: “Namely, a journalist from the Sloboda štampe foundation asked the management of the foundation in late December 2023 to be (at least temporarily) exempt from attending press conferences of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians and the National Council of the Hungarian Ethnic Minority, since she was being exposed to psychological pressure by her colleagues working at party-controlled media. According to her testimony, the colleagues look away when they see her, they do not greet her back and they even forbid their children to hang out with her son”.

It is also worth noting that non-collegial relation, lack of solidarity and even discriminatory attitude of journalists from pro-regime media towards their colleagues from independent media is a trend that has also been around for quite some time now when it comes to media reporting in Serbian, too. Such animosity sometimes turns into hate speech (tabloids) and campaigns against journalists who report critically, significantly endangers media freedoms and responsible journalism, because it abuses this profession in order to spread propaganda, thus endangering the citizens’ right to public information.



In the period between February and mid-May 2024, the IJAV commissioner in Senta recorded 9 cases when the bodies of the local self-government in Senta did not invite representatives of independent media to their official and public events. “It is interesting that these events are not just of a political nature. For example, there are various sporting events from which only those media under direct or indirect control of the ruling parties in the local self-government can report.”

The commissioner listed the following examples: memorial service at the city cemetery by the monument to the victims of the 1848/49 revolution, a press conference of a member of the municipal council in charge of education, Youth Sports Games, memorial services on the anniversary of the Hungarian national revolution of 1848, a press conference of the mayor in the village of Kevi on the occasion of reconstruction of a local road, the signing of a contract for renovation of the “Bolyai” grammar school for gifted children...

Furthermore, in the same period, representatives of independent media did not receive invitations to public events from some other public institutions either, such as schools or cultural centers. The commissioner also pointed out the psychological pressure put on the journalists from independent media because of posting media content on social networks (primarily Facebook).

“It is interesting that such cases were documented primarily in relation to the so-called ‘foreign policy’, i.e. when the texts are related to the political life and events in the neighboring Hungary. A part of the Hungarian population in Vojvodina (a great majority of them, without a doubt), loyal to the dominant political party in Hungary (FIDESZ) and the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán are absolutely intolerant when reading news and information about the Hungarian opposition or political alternatives in Hungary. In the comments on such media content, independent media and journalists are often labeled and branded as ‘traitors’, ‘liberals’ and ‘lefties’.”

Between May and July 2024, the IJAV commissioner registered that, apart from the bodies of the local self-government in Senta, who ‘traditionally’ fail to invite representatives of independent media to their official and public events, the same pattern had been adopted by some other institutions and organizations, which are somehow connected with the local self-government, such as the Tourist Organization, the Historical Archive and certain associations and companies.

“In the analyzed period, there was a constitutive session of the municipality of Senta Assembly, where a new mayor and the municipal administration were elected. That was definitely of public importance, since it concerned every citizen and every media outlet, but representatives of independent media still did not receive invitations to this event either.”

The report also highlights one of the most striking examples of political pressure on independent media, in this case the Sloboda štampe foundation, by the highest-ranking representatives of

Hungarians in Vojvodina.

“Namely, just after the local elections in June, Balint Pastor, president of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, posted a text on his Facebook account. He was analyzing the results of his party, but he unambiguously targeted our media house and our journalists, using the terms ‘journalist’, ‘research’, ‘independent’ and ‘objective’ just like that, under quotation marks, thus expressing his dissatisfaction and anger towards journalists who do not report in a way that he approves.”

This incident caused numerous reactions and condemnation by journalists’ organizations, and it was reported to international organizations and international donors.

### **3.1.6. PANČEVO – SLAPP LAWSUITS AS REACTION TO CRITICAL JOURNALISM**

*Analysis of the report submitted by the IJAV commissioner from Pančevo, Nenad Živković, editor-in-chief of the Pančevo SiTi portal, published by Građanska akcija Pančevo*

In his report related to 2023, the IJAV commissioner from Pančevo, Nenad Živković, pointed out that local institutions were preventing professional media and journalists access to information regarding the work of these institutions.

“On the official website of the city of Pančevo, the section ‘media in Pančevo’ - <http://www.pancevo.rs/zivot-u-pancevu/mediji-u-pancevu/> does not list all media from the territory of the city of Pančevo that regularly publish media content. Although regularly registered, there is no information nor contact details about the sites Panpress [www.panpress.rs](http://www.panpress.rs), K-013 [www.k-013.rs](http://www.k-013.rs) and Pančevo Si Ti [www.pancevo.city](http://www.pancevo.city). What these media have in common is that they cherish independent editorial policy,” it is stated in the report of the commissioner Nenad Živković.

It is also stated that in September of 2019, the city of Pančevo practically suspended the transparency of work of the city administration and its bodies, since it was then that the city administration informed the public they would suspend the practice of allowing journalists to attend the sessions of the City Council and that they would communicate with journalists and the public through press releases, press conferences, interviews and statements posted on their website.

However, independent media are not allowed to engage in such communication. “The attempts of journalists from independent media to get an interview or at least a statement, from, let’s say,

members of the city parliament, remain unsuccessful. The PR department of the city administration does not even reply to e-mails containing such requests. The division between media into ‘cooperative’ and ‘unsuitable’ is very well present and noticeable,” concludes the IJAV commissioner.

He also mentions a case from August 2023, related to a criminal complaint filed against a journalist from Starčevačke novine, Petar Andrejić, who had been publicly labelled because of his work, while a series of insults and threats had been addressed to him and his family. Namely, the Basic Public Prosecutor’s Office in Jagodina dismissed the criminal complaint filed by the police department in Jagodina, no. 1300/2023 of May 30, 2023, against Petar Andrejić, journalists from Starčevo, charged with the crime of persecution(...) “because there is no ground for believing that the accused had committed either this or any other crime for which he had been prosecuted by official duty”.

“This ends, at least temporarily, the conflict that has been going on between Andrejić, journalist from Starčevačke novine, and Anita Đukić, legal representative of the Kućica za spas animal protection association from Jagodina, who is also the owner of the [www.infocentrala.rs](http://www.infocentrala.rs) portal. Following his conversation on April 28, 2023, with Tatjana Stana, who is living in the same place and is active in matters related to protection of abandoned dogs, Andrejić was on the same day labelled as animal hater and murderer, while animal welfare protectors started spreading these accusations the next day, issuing a series of insults and threats to him and his family. On May 29, Andrejić tried to hold a press conference in front to the Kućica za spas association in Jagodina and to ask Anita Đukić to comment on the threats he had been receiving on social networks and to ask her if she felt as “an instigator of public lynch”. Anita Đukić called the police, who wrote an attestation about receiving notification from citizens, while the aforementioned report arrived the next day,” explains the IJAV commissioner.

This case has been singled out as an example of pressure and threats journalists are exposed to from various sectors, not only authorities, which indicates how deeply rooted this problem is in the society that does not cherish the culture of dialogue and critical thinking and that is deprived of public debates, which is why the public interest is often in danger.

In his report related to 2023, the IJAV commissioner from Pančevo mentions the case of a SLAPP lawsuit (a lawsuit that prevents the public to be informed) against a journalist from the Pančevo SiTi portal Slobodan Đukić, filed by an official from the municipal administration, Petar Čolaković.

Čolaković filed a lawsuit against Đukić because of a suspicion of allegedly committing a crime of illegal collection of personal information and publishing various documents testifying to Čolaković’s education on the Pančevo SiTi portal. The court case was in progress at the time when the report was compiled.

In September 2023, the IJAV commissioner from Pančevo recorded a case of pressure put by an investor on a photographer of Pančevac, Milan Šupica.

“An unnamed man who introduced himself as the investor of the construction of a residential facility in dr Svetislava Kasapinovića 20a Street in Pančevu tried to prevent photo-journalist Milan Šupica from taking photos of the location. Šupica called the police and two officers arrived on the location and explained to the investor that a photojournalist can freely take photos of public places and in the interest of the public.”

The commissioner does not know whether Šupica reported this incident, but he documented that only two days later a two-meter-tall metal fence was installed around the construction site.

In October 2023, the commissioner documented an example of a court case against a journalist from PanPress portal, Ivana Predić, accused by a media worker, Aleksandar Čupić from Vršac, “because she allegedly damaged his reputation and honor by publishing a text with the headline ‘Editor of E-Pančevo Čupić Failed to Appear in Court in Two Proceedings Lasting almost two years’”.

She is represented by the IJAV legal representative, Veljko Milić, attorney-at-law. The same month saw the release of a verdict of acquittal in the case against a journalist from Pančevo Si Ti, Slobodan Dukić, following a criminal complaint filed by Petar Čolaković, employed at the Municipal Administration of Kovin, because of a text dealing with the latter’s academic qualifications.

In November of the same year, the commissioner documented a case of discrimination against journalists by the city administration of Pančevo, which ignored requests to access information of public importance regarding environmental issues.

In December 2023, the Court of Appeal upheld the sentence of the High Court in Belgrade following a private lawsuit filed by journalists Nenad Živković against RTV Pančevo and (then-) editor-in-chief of this media, Miroslav Milakov, for compensation for non-material damage of damage to reputation and honor by publishing extremely insulting claims in seven features broadcast on this TV station between February 22 and 28, 2019. The Court of Appeal upheld the sentence and ordered the defendants to pay RSD 130,000 and the court costs of RSD 84,800, RSD 24,800 of which are stamp duty.

In March 2024, the commissioner from Pančevo, Nenad Živković, documented a case of a SLAPP lawsuit filed against him by a former head of the Police Department of Pančevo, Igor Arsić, because of an article. Živković is represented by Veljko Milić, attorney-at-law. In the same month, there was a court case against journalist Slobodan Dukić, instigated by the head of the Naša radost preschool from Kovin, Aleksandra Alavanja, also because of an article. Dukić is also represented by Veljko Milić, attorney-at-law.

In June 2024, a first-instance sentence was issued against journalist Ivana Predić, ordering her to pay a fine, following a lawsuit instigated by media worker from Vršac, Aleksandar Čupić. This case was characterized as a SLAPP lawsuit, and the verdict was appealed to a second instance court.

In the same month, the commissioner documented that the results of the media competition were published in Pančevo and that the funds allocated to public information had been drastically decreased, i.e. they had been reduced to one tenth of the budget that was allocated in the previous year.

### **3.1.7. DIMITROVGRAD – PRESSURE, THREATS AND POLICE REPRESSION**

*Analysis of the report by the IJAV commissioner from Dimitrovgrad, Danijela Apostolov Videnov, journalists from a bilingual multimedia portal FAR, published by the Emblema Citizen Association.*

In her first report, the IJAV commissioner from Dimitrovgrad, Danijela Apostolov Videnov, pointed out a case of discrimination, which could also be characterized as an example of repression of journalists and which would most certainly lead to a court case.

Namely, a correspondent of BTA, the founder of the GLAS association, the editor of bilingual portal in Serbian and Hungarian Glas press from Bosilegrad, Aleksandar Dimitrov, was held by the border police of Serbia at the Ribarci border-crossing near Bosilegrad on August 9, 2023 “because he was carrying books in Bulgarian”. The books in question are three copies of *Елегия за Краището. Съдбата на българите в Западните покрайнини* by Edvin Sugarev, former consul of the Republic of Bulgaria in Niš.

“After being detained for several hours at the border crossing, he was issued a document to sign. According to the document, he was supposed to urgently return the books to Bulgaria, because he could not enter Serbia with them, which he refused to do, believing that he was not committing any misdemeanor. After that, the customs officers told him that the books would remain at the Ribartci checkpoint for 72 hours, gave him a record to sign and allowed him to enter Serbia after five and a half hours of detention. He will appeal this decision and has already informed the media in Bulgaria and Serbia, as well as the diplomatic missions of the Republic of Bulgaria in Serbia about that,” states the report by the IJAV commissioner.

The FAR portal also mentions another example of discrimination, when the office of the

president of the Municipality of Dimitrovgrad, in the period between June and August 2023, failed to answer any journalists' questions either at all or in a timely manner. The questions were sent to the official e-mail address and the topics were related to the current problems of citizens. In October 2023, the commissioner documented pressure and threats that the journalists from the regional news agency JUGpress were exposed to.

“Attorney-at-law from Leskovac Zvezdan Knežević threatened the editorial board of the regional news agency JUGpress with ‘burning down the building and people’ because of an interview with a former leader of the Socialist Party of Serbia in Leskovac and the Jablanica district, Živojin Stefanović, a.k.a. Žika Žmigavac, about October 5, 2000. Stefanović’s house was burnt down, which is what he talked about in the interview and said that he was against any kind of hate speech in public, adding that he had sued the Republic of Serbia and received compensation for having his house burnt down. Knežević did not stop there, but went on to make a phone call to journalist Ivana Spirič, who did the interview with Stefanović and advised him what topics JUGpress should deal with and what they should write and what not. He made similar pressure in several comments on the Facebook page of JUGpress. The editorial board of JUGpress saw that as a very serious threat and pressure on the members of the editorial board, especially because is labelled by his well-informed colleagues as an ‘SNS’ bot close to the authorities in Leskovac.”

A criminal complaint was filed against Knežević, but was rejected on the grounds that his statement did not contain direct threats.

In her report from November, the IJAV commissioner from Dimitrovgrad documented pressure on the journalists from the FAR portal and Južne vesti.

“An inappropriate comment was made by an official from the municipality on Facebook regarding an article published by the FAR internet portal dedicated to November 8. The article uses historical facts to talk about the separation of one part of the territory of then-Bulgaria, still populated by ethnic Bulgarians (Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad). Namely, the official made this inappropriate comment in order to point out that the text had been directed against Serbia. This started a series of comments by other readers (SNS activists), who called FAR an interest group.

This constituted labelling, discrimination, economic and political pressure, as well as another type of pressure, which classified FAR as a media outlet that promotes nationalism, which cannot be supported by facts in any way.”

In December 2023, she documented pressure on the editorial board of FAR from citizen associations that were dissatisfied with their reporting on the allocation of budget funds for projects in the civil sectors, i.e. on the abuses in spending the public money. In order to impose pressure, they mostly used social networks, on which they made negative comments about this



media outlet.

In February 2024, she documented that a journalist from FAR and president of the Emblema association from Dimitrovgrad, Slaviša Milanov, was exposed to maltreatment by the police in Pirot.

“On his way from Dimitrovgrad to Pirot with the editor-in-chief of FAR, Petar Videnov, his car was pulled over by the traffic police at the very entrance to Pirot. After checking the documents for fifteen minutes, the police took Slaviša Milanov to the police department in Pirot for testing on drugs and alcohol, while Petar Videnov remained in the car. Even though the test on drugs and alcohol came back negative, Milanov was detained for questioning at the department of criminal police under the excuse that he was suspected of smuggling some people the police were looking for over the border with Bulgaria. Milanov denied the allegations and insisted that the police check the cameras at the Gradina border-crossing near Dimitrovgrad at the Serbian-Bulgarian border. The police failed to do so. Having been detained for more than two and a half hours, Milanov was taken back to his car by police inspectors and Petar Videnov was waiting there. The police officers then searched the car, after which Milanov and Videnov drove the car to the police station, escorted by the police inspectors. Slaviša Milanov then had his documents and phone returned to him, after being taken from him at the beginning of the procedure. Upon arriving home, Milanov realized that all his information, applications, programs and e-mails had been inspected illegally and without his permission. Also, 1.g GB of data was copied.”

Legal advice was provided in this matter and a criminal complaint was filed subsequently. New examples of pressure were documented in April 2024, but this time the instigators were the opposition parties.

“The JUGPRESS portal from Leskovac received an e-mail from the local branch office of the SRCE party, in which they demand ‘an explanation’ from the editor-in-chief regarding why this media outlet had not covered their press conference. Because of this type of political pressure from SRCE, which has one member of parliament in the Leskovac City Assembly, JUGPRESS publicly reacted by commenting, ‘They want to beat up journalists who helped them get one MP.

Imagine they had two?’ This comment emphasizes that media do not serve any politician and that pressure and threats to journalists need to stop.”

Legal advice was provided regarding this case.

In the same month, the commissioner documented that the results of the local media competition were published and that, despite changes to the law, the practice of making the importance and role of public information senseless had been continued. Namely, out of 15.5 million dinars at disposal, as much as 10,1 million went to the media owned by Radoica Milosavljević, who is close to the authorities, while 1 million remained unallocated.

“FAR turned to the Dimitrovgrad Municipal Council and the committee in charge of selecting the projects, asking to be delivered the documents created in the process of selection – the minutes, a professional evaluation of the committee, a detailed explanation of the suggested projects, such as grading in accordance with the criteria and assessment of the amount in relation to the set criteria, the documents related to the applied methodology behind the assessment criteria and the allocated funds, as well as other documents that had not been delivered or published on the website of the municipality. The request was submitted on April 23, 2024, and no reply was received by the end of the month.”

Legal advice was provided in this matter.

### **3.1.8. BAČKA TOPOLA – JOURNALISTS’ SOURCES ALSO TARGET OF PRESSURE**

*Analysis of the report submitted by the IJAV commissioner from Bačka Topola, Maje Savić, journalist from the Magločistač portal*

In September 2023, the IJAV commissioner Maja Savić documented a threat directed at the Magločistač portal which came from the police department. “Geological police asked Magločistač to remove a text because they would ‘otherwise have problems’. The text in question dealt with the does shot at the Zobnatica JSC estate.”

The same portal was also exposed to discrimination in the same month: “The only way for Magločistač to communicate with institutions and officials is through a request for information of public importance. Magločistač is not present on any mailing list, nor do institutions respond to the e-mails sent by this media outlet.” The representatives of this media outlet were provided with legal advice.

In the same period, a journalist from RTV, who wished to remain anonymous, reported to the IJAV commissioner in Bačka Topola pressure he was exposed at his workplace. He had intended to research the flow of money in the Museum of the Bačka Topola Municipality, but after he had sent a request for access to information of public importance, his editor suggested he should deal with that topic. Legal advice was provided regarding this case.

In September 2023, there was a case of pressure of local institutions imposed on the citizens who communicate with media, which is the latest trend journalists and media are facing, since such pressure further hinders their work and jeopardizes the right to public information. “Journalists Imre Tot, who works for the Hungarian magazine Családi Kőr wrote about the

problems of citizens in the municipality of Bačka Topola, where the works on the construction of high-speed railroad are currently in progress. He was told by the citizens that, after he had published his text, some representatives of the local community in Bačka Topola had been angry with the citizens and asked them, ‘How dare you talk to journalists?’ The citizens talked to Tot because of the cracked asphalt and collapsed fence, which are the consequences of the works conducted in that area. Also, the façade on some houses cracked because of the heavy machinery passing nearby and the vibrations they create.”

In October 2023, the commissioner reported that throughout the analyzed period, which encompassed the electoral campaign for parliamentary and provincial elections, the editorial board of *Magločistača* had not been invited to a single press conference or event organized by the local self-government in Bačka Topola or by most local institutions.

In November, the commissioner reported a verbal assault and threats she had experienced while reporting from a public debate on the study of environmental impact of the Lukač watering system at the reservoir lake in Bačka Topola.

While photographing the gathering, one of the thirty-odd citizens present angrily asked the journalist who had given her permission to take photos. The journalist explained she was reporting on the event, but the citizen replied he was not interested in that and that she had no right to take photos without permission. He also added that he was a retired police officer and that he ‘very well knows how it goes’, and that he would sue the journalist if he appeared in any photo that was going to be published.

The commissioner was also exposed to pressure when writing an analytical text on mobbing, i.e. the cases of abuse at workplace which were processed by the court. Because of the statements of interviewees, who testified about their experience with the Komgrad company, this company accused her of spreading hatred and misinformation and not reporting objectively after she had published her text. The same messages were also posted on social networks.

In December 2023, the commissioner documented that the Tourist Organization (TO) of Bačka Topola did not want to provide evidence to *Magločistač*, nor to answer any questions related to the gift bags given to children for New Year’s Eve on the last day of the electoral campaign.

“The questions related to the source of financing the gift bags and the criteria according to which they were distributed, since the citizens accused TO of distributing the gift bags in exchange for votes for SNS.”

In February 2024, she reported an absurd example of discrimination she had been exposed to while writing an article on an example of good practice regarding encouraging the education of the Roma population.

The example of good practice was found in Stara Pazova, so she contacted the municipal

authorities, who originally promised to give her a statement, only to refuse the request because the media outlet she was writing for was not from that municipality. An even more absurd answer was given by the coordinator of activities regarding the Roma population in that municipality, who said he was not allowed to give statements without a permission from the Municipality. Furthermore, the National Council of the Roma Ethnic Community did not want to talk about this topic.

In May, she reported the discrimination and labelling she had experienced when, immediately after the elections were called in Serbia, she sent an official e-mail to all existing municipal branch offices of political parties, inviting them to cooperate during the election campaign in the interest of all citizens. Still, she did not receive a single invitation to any press conference, nor a single press release from the ruling parties in the municipality (SVM, SNS and SPS) or from the local self-government and local communities. The invitation for cooperation was accepted only by the coalition of opposition parties and citizen associations, so the journalist was once again labeled as “opposition journalist” by the local officials.

A new case of discrimination was documented in July 2024, when the administration of Bačka Topola refused to give her a press accreditation for reporting from the municipal assembly and she did not receive any answer to the request she had submitted for this purpose. Legal advice was provided to the journalist.

### **3.1.9. KRAGUJEVAC – POLITICIANS AND PHANTOM MEDIA UNITED AGAINST JOURNALISTS**

*Analysis of the report by the IJAV commissioner from Kragujevac, Jovanka Marović, editor at Glas Šumadije from Kragujevac, published by Glas građana Šumadije*

In August 2023, the IJAV commissioner from Kragujevac, Jovanka Marović, documented a case of a journalist who wished to remain anonymous and who was threatened by a police officer.

“On two occasions in August, the journalist working at a local radio station received messages on her private Facebook account advising her to ‘calm down’. This was a reaction on her posting pictures from a protest walk Serbia against violence”, the IJAV commissioner’s report states. Legal advice was sought during reporting and a criminal complaint and a lawsuit were filed after the threats were received.

The IJAV commissioner from Kragujevac also reported that subtle pressure on independent journalists from political parties and pro-regime media was noticed in that city: “Besides one portal that is not listed in the register of media outlets and which is under the control of SNS, during July and August 2023, three more portals appeared, but without the names of the founders, editors or journalists. Judging by the content they publish, it can be concluded that two are close to SNS, while one is close to an opposition party. What is typical of them all is that fact that they take texts, photos and video material without consent...”.

In November 2024, the commissioner from Kragujevac documented a threat to a journalist from the Ritam grada portal, Nenad Živadinović, who had the windshield on his car parked in front of his building demolished.

“The case was reported to the contact point at the police and the police department of Kragujevac. The police visited the scene, investigated the area around, but the perpetrator was not found. The aggrieved party stated that the incident was related to his job as a journalist and that he felt endangered.”

In the report covering 2024, the IJAV commissioner was exposed to a campaign on Facebook, with a message that ‘someone with such surname, that is not typical of central Serbia, cannot deal with the topics from central Serbia’. This case was not reported.

### 3.1.10. SOMBOR – BOTS AND CYBER ATTACKS IN ORDER TO SILENCE JOURNALISTS

*Analysis of the report by the IJAV commissioner from Sombor, Sava Majstorov, journalist and editor of SO Info portal, founded by SO open NGO*

In his first report for 2023, the IJAV commissioner from Sombor, Sava Majstorov, documented that there were no assaults on journalists in this area, but that there was regular pressure on them.

“The city administration of the City of Sombor, at least according to the experience of the journalists from our portal, tends to prolong the deadlines more frequently when it comes to publishing reports from the sessions of the city council, materials for the City Assembly sessions, i.e. the decisions that accompany public proceedings. Several dozens of requests submitted by SO Info journalists remain unanswered.”

The IJAV commissioner himself was exposed to pressure in August and September. Namely, he received what he describes as ‘a traditional phone call’ at 23:55 from an unlisted number, which is a regular occurrence when SO Info writes about the murder of journalist Slavko Ćuruvija.

Furthermore, as the commissioner reports, a ‘bot’, whose identity is known to the editorial board, was trying to ‘tire out the readers by posting senseless comments on most published news and information’.

“After we had deleted several of his posts, he called out the moderator in more than 80 comments in one hour, so the account was removed, along with a few inappropriate ones from Facebook. We can also detect new profiles using a similar pattern. It is clear that the elections are near,’ the commissioner stated in his report.

In 2024, the IJAV commissioner reported on a cyber-attack on the SO Info portal.

“The attack started on Tuesday, March 4, at around 10 p.m, and lasted until the end of the week. The site was completely unfunctional for a few days. The most serious segment of the attack saw 35 million hits and 400 GB of traffic. The analysis of the attack proved that the portal was the target.”

The Cyber Crime Department of the Prosecutor’s Office was informed about the incident through the network of IJAV commissioners.



#### **4. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The changes to the Law on Public Information and Media should envisage sanctions for discrimination against journalists and media;

- A fund should be established for media and journalists who are victims of SLAPP lawsuits and other malicious campaigns directed at discouraging journalists from doing their job;

- The Criminal Code should be amended to improve the protection of journalists by introducing a new crime act that would incriminate the present behaviors which jeopardize the safety of journalists and which are not treated as crimes by the current legislation;

- Local journalists should be provided with permanent training regarding recognizing discrimination and other types of dangerous behavior which jeopardize the work of journalists and the available mechanisms of protection;



Каталогизација у публикацији

Библиотеке Матице српске, Нови Сад

070.422(497.11)

316.774(497.11)

LOKALNE institucije suspendovale javnost, novinari nepoželjni, građani u medijskom mraku [Elektronski izvor] / [pripremili Branka Dragović Savić, Veljko Milić]. - Novi Sad : Nezavisno društvo novinara Vojvodine, 2024

Način pristupa (URL): <https://www.ndnv.org>. - Opis zasnovan na stanju na dan 24.9.2024. -

Nasl. sa naslovnog ekrana.

ISBN 978-86-88303-41-5

а) Новинари -- Положај -- Србија б) Медији -- Србија

COBISS.SR-ID 152725257



Kingdom of the Netherlands

**THIS PUBLICATION IS DEVELOPED WITHIN THE  
PROJECT "RESILIENCE NETWORK FOR SAFEGUARDING  
JOURNALISTS AGAINST DISCRIMINATION AND  
IMPROVED INTERSECTORAL TRUST IN MULTIETHNIC  
COMMUNITIES IN SERBIA " , SUPPORTED BY THE  
DUTCH MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS UNDER MATRA  
PROGRAM**