

Declining media freedom and biased reporting on foreign actors in Serbia

Prospects for an enhanced EU approach

Clingendael Report

Dragana Bajić
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Netherlands Institute of International Relations



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Cover photo: Woman hand with microphone tied with a chain, depicting the idea of freedom of the press or freedom of expression on dark background. World press freedom day concept.
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Executive summary

In the context of the global crisis caused by the novel coronavirus pandemic, free, impartial and professional media reporting has become ever more important. This represents an issue in Serbia, considering its ongoing decline in media freedom as confirmed by independent international reports. The conditions for practising professional journalism have been degraded for years and the Serbian media sector has faced numerous challenges, including political control over the mainstream media, low financial sustainability of media outlets and related high dependence on state funding, as well as a lack of transparency of that funding. Obscure media ownership and privatisation issues are yet another reason for concern. Additionally, the safety of journalists is problematic as the number of pressures, threats and attacks has grown since 2013, but the impunity phenomenon remains present. All these factors lead to a general state of censorship and self-censorship in the media in Serbia.

This media situation, characterised by political control over mainstream outlets, also creates an environment for poorly evidenced and biased media reporting on the key foreign policy actors: the EU, the US and Russia.¹ Available media monitoring reports show notable differences in the tone of reporting, space given to these actors and topics covered, among others. One of the side effects is that dominant media narratives can have strong implications for Serbian citizens' attitudes, primarily towards the EU, hindering the implementation of the Union's communication strategy towards Serbia and support for membership. This is problematic given the shared interests of both sides and vast efforts devoted to making Serbia a full EU member.

Media freedom, as an extension of freedom of expression, is a key value of the EU. The Union employs a range of instruments to foster media freedom in Serbia, including political steering, technical assistance and financial support for media organisations and initiatives. At the same time, as a result of the EU's lacking competences, the media sector is by default not a central issue in the EU's enlargement policies. As a result, in practice, EU instruments focussed on the media sector are fragmented and lack the prioritisation needed to effect real change. Political messaging to Serbia is deficient, reform benchmarks lack detail and financial support for individual media has proven insufficient to bring about structural improvements to media freedom in Serbia.

1 The selection of foreign policy actors was based on the availability of secondary data as well as the overall dominance of these actors in the national media, as compared to others. Until the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, China had no major influence on the media, and is therefore excluded from this research. Its effects during and after the pandemic are yet to be examined.

For both normative and self-interested reasons, the EU should thus have an interest in providing greater backing for the protection and promotion of media freedom and professional reporting in Serbia. To that extent, this report recommends that interlocutors of the EU institutions and Member States step up political messaging to Serbia in order to maintain sufficient pressure on Serbian political elites to engage in deep media sector reform and ensure media freedom. The EU could better specify its accession benchmarks, and EU reports could provide greater detail in their analysis of media freedom issues in Serbia. The EU would also do well to increase its budget for tackling media freedom issues in order to underpin its political message that media freedom is a key factor in the EU accession process. Independent media may benefit from increased support, both in terms of funding and in terms of technical assistance that may help such media to create sustainable business models.

1 Introduction

The 2019-2020 global coronavirus outbreak has shown the paramount importance of people's trust in government and the media. More than before, the media appear to be the key means of informing the public in a timely manner and distributing clear and truthful messages that would help the overall well-being of the population. Especially in times of crisis, well-informed citizens are better able to make educated decisions, and may behave more cooperatively and in solidarity, and act reasonably and rationally. This is why freedom of expression is one of the greatest values in times of crisis.

Serbia is an EU candidate country that has been negotiating membership since 2014, but the prospect of joining the EU in fact goes all the way back to the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit. The EU attaches substantial value to media issues in the accession process. It examines media freedom and freedom of expression against a set of political criteria and six chapters of the *acquis communautaire*,² although the attention devoted to media freedom in the *acquis* as a whole is rather limited, as the issue has largely remained a competence limited to the EU Member States (MS). The Union nevertheless promotes free journalism in Serbia through technical assistance with the drafting of media laws and policies, as well as through financial support for projects as part of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance. Since 2000, for instance, it has supported media freedom in Serbia with €33 million through various programmes.³

The European Commission annual country reports on Serbia have for many years raised the alarm about the overall poor situation in the media sector, characterised by an environment that is not “conducive to exercise freedom of expression.”⁴ In fact, the reports show no progress whatsoever in the freedom of expression area since 2015. Despite the EU's engagement, a number of Serbian journalists and media experts agree that the tools the EU utilises within the accession process have been weak and inadequate to respond to the gravity of the circumstances suffered by the domestic

2 Those are: 5 – Public Procurement, 8 – Competition Policy, 10 – Information Society and Media, 23 – Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, 28 – Consumer and Health Protection, and 32 – Financial Control. Ivana Teofilović et al. (2018), “Freedom of Expression and Media Freedom in Serbia in the EU Integration Process”, Civic Initiatives, Belgrade, p. 4, <https://bit.ly/2sS4ReH>

3 The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia, “Media”, <https://bit.ly/36kQluG>

4 See European Commission, European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, “Strategy and Reports”, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/package_en

media sector at present.⁵ A steady decline of media freedom over the years, which will be discussed in detail in the sections that follow, has made it difficult for journalists to do their job safely, impartially and with integrity. Sporadic reproaches by the EU have brought few tangible results and failed to prevent a further deterioration of media freedom. Such an environment has contributed to Serbia's notable decline in the Freedom House Nations in Transit ranking, in which, for the first time since 2003, this country is no longer categorised as a democracy but as a hybrid regime.⁶

Meanwhile, around 87% of Serbia's population relies on TV as the most popular form of media.⁷ Media literacy is underdeveloped⁸ and most citizens show no interest in the sources behind the news they consume.⁹ This creates a formula for the spread of disinformation. A recent example is Serbian citizens' perception that China is the biggest donor or that it provided most help during the COVID-19 pandemic,¹⁰ whereas available data indicate that the EU is still by far the biggest donor in Serbia.¹¹ In the context of a flawed media sector and accompanying dominance of media bias on foreign actors, which is considered in detail in the next section, there is a concern that the general population might be highly susceptible to messages conveyed by the controlled media.

The academic literature confirms that this concern may be genuine. While there is no consensus among scholars in communication theory, most studies seem to maintain that there is a correlation between mass media and public opinion, with some pointing to a

5 Sena Marić, Dragana Bajić (2018), "EU's Benchmarking within Chapters 23 and 24 in Accession Negotiations with Serbia: Effects and Challenges", European Policy Institute (EPI), Skopje, p. 18

6 Zselyke Csaky (2020), "Nations in Transit 2020 Dropping the Democratic Façade in Europe and Eurasia", Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade>

7 Findings from 2017. Source: "IPSOS Focus: Serbia F&F 2017", May 2018, P. 19, <https://bit.ly/34iDIWz>

8 Jelena Surculija Milojevic, (2018) "Monitoring Media Pluralism in Europe: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor 2017 in the European Union, FYROM, Serbia & Turkey", European University Institute, <https://bit.ly/2YlaBtg>

9 National Democratic Institute (2019), "Between East and West: Public Opinion & Media Disinformation in the Western Balkans", <https://bit.ly/33p6LBb>

10 See Institute for European Affairs (2020), "Stavovi građana Srbije prema Rusiji", Belgrade, p. 4, <http://iea.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Stav-gra%C4%91ana-Srbije-prema-Rusiji-mart-2020.pdf>; Faculty of Political Sciences (2020), "Stavovi građana Republike Srbije o COVID-19", pp. 10-11, <http://www.fpn.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/lzve%C5%A1taj-Stavovi-gra%C4%91ana-Republike-Srbije-o-COVID-19.pdf>

11 See Aleksandar Ivković, "Kina, EU, Rusija: Ko je Koliko pomogao Srbiji tokom pandemije?", European Western Balkans, 01.05.2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/kina-eu-rusija-ko-je-koliko-pomogao-srbiji-tokom-pandemije/>; RFLRL, "Who gives the most aid to Serbia?", <https://www.rferl.org/a/who-gives-the-most-aid-to-serbia-/30660859.html> (accessed 11 June 2020); In an interview for Radio Free Europe in June 2020, the Serbian president confirmed that the EU "is by far the largest investor and by far the largest donor" in Serbia. See Maja Živanović, "Vučić za RSE: Čekam predlog za Kosovo", Radio Free Europe, 7.6.2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-kosovo-srbija-dijalog-eu-kina-rusija/30657562.html>

direct causative impact of media reporting on public opinion.¹² In Serbia, public opinion polls reveal that support for EU and NATO memberships is lowest compared to other Western Balkan countries, while Russia is seen more favourably than the EU and the US.¹³ Young people (56%) think that citizens would be the same or worse off if Serbia became an EU member, while more than a third think Serbia should rely on Russia in its foreign policy.¹⁴ As confirmed by other research, Serbian “media coverage of foreign actors—including the presence of disinformation—generally correlates with public opinion, suggesting a strong causative impact”.¹⁵

This Clingendael report presents the most prominent problems that the media sector in Serbia faces today. It argues that the flawed media landscape is the major factor leading to poor and biased reporting on topics related to the EU, the US and Russia. It observes media bias as a phenomenon in which media coverage presents inaccurate, unbalanced and/or unfair views with an intention¹⁶ to affect reader opinions in a particular direction.¹⁷ The analysis places a special focus on what such reporting means for the EU, given its strategic and communication goals for Serbia and the Western Balkans region.

Relying on secondary data, the report first identifies what dominant biases exist in the domestic media in Serbia when it comes to the EU, the US and Russia. It then examines the main contributors to such biases, making a distinction between factors leading to biased reporting and those that limit media freedom in general. Lastly, the paper outlines EU efforts to curb the deterioration of media freedom in Serbia and assesses their effectiveness. The report concludes that issues with media freedom have a real effect on how foreign policy biases promoted by Serbia’s government are amplified in reporting, risking impacting public opinion. The authors make concrete recommendations to EU and EU Member State policymakers for measures to address flaws in the Serbian media landscape, and thereby tackle undesired biases in foreign policy reporting.

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- 12 See for example: Maxwell McCombs (2014), *Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion* (second edition), Polity Press p. 2, p. 5; See also Matthew A. Baum & Philip B.K. Potter (2008). ‘The Relationships Between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol 11 (39-65), <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060406.214132>.
- 13 Regional Cooperation Council (2019), *Balkan Barometer 2019: Public opinion analytical report*, Sarajevo, p. 37, https://www.rcc.int/seeds/files/RCC_BalkanBarometer_PublicOpinion_2019.pdf; National Democratic Institute (2019), op. cit.
- 14 Aleksandar Ivković, “Mladi protiv članstva Srbije u EU” [Youth against Serbia’s EU membership], *European Western Balkans*, 15.8.2019, <https://bit.ly/2Rn8eVn>
- 15 National Democratic Institute (2019), op. cit.
- 16 Levasseur, David G. (2008) “Media Bias.” In *Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, edited by Lynda L. Kaid and Christina Holtz-Bacha, 434-440. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., doi: 10.4135/9781412953993.n387.
- 17 Sendhil Mullainathan, Andrei Shleifer (2002) “Media Bias”, NBER Working Paper 9295, National Bureau of Economic Research, Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w9295>

2 What messages on foreign actors are conveyed to citizens?

This section relies on secondary data gathered by external research organisations through different media monitoring projects in 2018-2019. It presents a synthesis of findings about how media in Serbia report on the three foreign policy actors, the EU, the USA and Russia. These monitoring studies confirm the presence of a dominant bias on the three observed countries. In other words, citizens relying on mainstream and usually politically-controlled sources are regularly exposed to partial and sensationalist content. One of the notable characteristics of such reporting is that it merely forwards information at the expense of debate, provides a limited factual basis and lacks sources of verification.

When it comes to coverage of the EU, US and Russia, this means in the first place that media headlines tend to be sensationalist in their discourse, while reports are usually non-evidence-based and superficial. The covers of pro-government dailies, dealing with topics related to these three countries, are usually emotionally charged in an attempt to touch upon people's past memories, feelings, beliefs and values. For example, covers from 2019 of some of the cheapest and most read newspapers stated the following: "The battle for Kosovo begins! Palmer v. Vucic, America v. Serbia",¹⁸ "Serbia will not stand for humiliation: Palmer withdraws ultimatum?",¹⁹ "What lies behind Matthew Palmer's threats: Three reasons why America is pressuring us".²⁰

18 Informer daily cover, 4 November 2019, available at <https://informer.rs/vesti/srbija/469511/samo-danasnjem-informeru-danas-vazan-sastanak-krece-bitka-kosovo-palmer-protiv-vucica-amerika-protiv-srbije>.

19 Kurir daily cover, 4 November 2019, available at <https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/info/prelistavanje-dnevnih-novina-za-4-novembar-2019-godine-2019-11-03>.

20 Blic daily cover, 4 November 2019, available at <https://www.blic.rs/print/naslovna-za-0411/ltsmsb>.

Figure 1 Snipped parts of covers of three popular dailies in Serbia, dated 4 November 2019



Looking at the tone of reporting (positive/negative/neutral), monitoring reports concluded that there was a notable difference between the three observed actors. The reporting tone is neutral overall for all three of them, but coverage of Russia is markedly positive compared to that of the EU and the US. Monitoring of TV content

in Serbia found the following: among the number of TV items covering the EU, 83% of them report neutrally, followed by positive (10%) and negative (6%) reporting; the tone on the USA is predominantly neutral (83% of monitored TV items), followed by negative (9%) and positive (8%); reporting on Russia is also predominantly neutral (76%), but the positive tone is present in 21% of monitored TV items, while only 3% of them are negative towards Russia.²¹ As can be seen, following the neutral tones, the most frequent portrayal of the EU on TV is positive and of the US negative, as corroborated by other monitoring of top media outlets in Serbia.²² Unsurprisingly, reporting about NATO is predominantly negative, which can be related directly to the NATO bombing campaign in the nineties.²³

Looking at Russia specifically, the length of TV reporting is shorter overall than on the other two actors,²⁴ but Russia-related stories are generally more affirmative and less analytical.²⁵ Exceptionally positive coverage of this country is characteristic for two TV stations close to the government.²⁶ In the printed media, articles critical of Russia are practically non-existent, with a minor number reporting in a neutral way.²⁷

Second, apart from reporting tone, the representation of topics related to the EU, Russia and the US in the Serbian media differs. Although Serbia's aspirations to join the EU date back to the early 2000s, topics pertaining to relations with the EU have been sidelined. Monitoring conducted in late 2018 showed that Serbia's EU integration

21 Zoran Gavrilović, Dražen Pavlica, Marina Mijatović (2019), "World in Media", Bureau for Social Research, Belgrade, <https://bit.ly/36xgVl2>, p. 18

22 A monitoring of top media outlets in Serbia, conducted between June 2017 and November 2018. National Democratic Institute (2019), op. cit., p. 48.

23 See several monitoring reports: National Democratic Institute (2019), "Between East and West: Public Opinion & Media Disinformation in the Western Balkans", <https://bit.ly/33p6LBb>; Zoran Gavrilović, Dražen Pavlica, Marina Mijatović (2019), "World in Media", Bureau for Social Research, Belgrade, <https://bit.ly/36xgVl2>; Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability (2018), "Medijsko izveštavanje o međunarodnim akterima: Slučaj Srbije, Crne Gore, Bosne i Hercegovine i Makedonije", CRTA, Belgrade.

24 "The US-dominated broadcasts lasted 12:13:37, almost double the time of the EU-dominated broadcasts (6:56:15), while in the case of Russia it was 5:01:28." Bureau for Social Research, "Nastavlja se trend biltenskog, plitkog, neanalitičkog izveštavanja u kojem je ključni akter predsednik Srbije" [Continuing trend of newsletter-type, shallow, and non-analytical reporting, in which the key actor is the President of Serbia] 1.3.2019, <https://bit.ly/2PdFziA>

25 See Bureau for Social Research, "Nastavlja se trend biltenskog, plitkog, neanalitičkog izveštavanja u kojem je ključni akter predsednik Srbije" [Continuing trend of newsletter-type, shallow, and non-analytical reporting, in which the key actor is the President of Serbia] 1.3.2019, <https://bit.ly/2PdFziA>

26 Bureau for Social Research, "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung neprecizno ocenio način izveštavanja medija o EU u Srbiji", 29.4.2019, <https://bit.ly/2PiQjRS>

27 Vuk Velebit, "Pro-ruski narativ u srpskim medijima (2) – Zašto su domaći mediji emotivniji od ruskih", 22 May 2019, <https://bit.ly/2RsMG9G>

was outside the top ten most TV-covered topics on the EU, US and Russia.²⁸ Moreover, in the same period of monitoring high EU officials appeared far less than the US and Russian presidents, despite the fact that TV coverage of the EU is lengthier than that of Russia.²⁹ At the same time, EU officials appeared more than the domestic actors dealing with EU integration (such as the minister for EU integration or the head of the negotiating team).³⁰ The limited comprehensive discussion of the accession process in the mainstream media might have a negative impact on citizens' understanding of how the Union operates and what benefits and downsides EU membership might bring.

Third, many articles on foreign affairs lack reliable sources of verification. Regional monitoring revealed that more than a third (33%) of Serbian media content on the EU, the US and Russia had no stated sources, which was the highest number in the region compared to Bosnia and Herzegovina (23%), North Macedonia (5%) and Montenegro (5%).³¹ Such deficiencies in the citation of sources further enables sensationalist and partial reporting, contributes to the tabloidisation of political discourse and paves the way for the spread of disinformation and fake news.

Finally, nationwide TV stations report superficially on the three foreign policy actors mentioned above. They mostly forward information concerning events and facts, with little analysis that could open a debate. Questioning and critical observations are less present in articles that discuss Russia or Serbia-US relations.³² This lack of in-depth debate in reporting offers little alternative to viewers, hampers the culture of plurality of opinion and contributes to more polarisation in the country. This prevents the media from acting as the "fourth branch of power" and providing critical scrutiny of politicians as it would normally do in an established democracy.

28 Bureau for Social Research, "Nastavlja se trend biltenskog, plitkog, neanalitičkog izveštavanja u kojem je ključni akter predsednik Srbije" [Continuing trend of newsletter-type, shallow, and non-analytical reporting, in which the key actor is the President of Serbia] 1.3.2019, <https://bit.ly/2NEXQVf>.

29 Aleksandar Ivković, op.cit.; Zoran Gavrilović, Dražen Pavlica, Marina Mijatović, "World in Media", Bureau for Social Research, 2019, Belgrade, pp. 20-21

30 Ibid.

31 Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability (2018) "Medijsko izveštavanje o međunarodnim akterima: Slučaj Srbije, Crne Gore, Bosne i Hercegovine i Makedonije" [Media reporting on international actors: The case of Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia], CRTA, Belgrade, p. 3.

32 Bureau for Social Research, "Nastavlja se trend biltenskog, plitkog, neanalitičkog izveštavanja u kojem je ključni akter predsednik Srbije", op. cit.

3 The crisis of the journalistic profession in Serbia

Flaws related to the lack of media freedom in Serbia are one of the factors hampering reporting on the EU, the USA and Russia. This section first discusses how growing political control over mainstream media impacts the tone and quality of reporting. It subsequently examines how other defects within the broader media landscape, which mostly have to do with the general lack of media freedom, indirectly contribute to it.

The triggers

Several factors related to state control over media can be identified as having an impact on the quality of media content offered to citizens. This section analyses the issues of media ownership and privatisation, the economic unsustainability of the media and the accompanying state funding issue.

A long-standing media ownership problem is one of the factors of partial reporting. Due to the flawed media privatisation process that started in the early 2000s, the state co-owns two dailies (Večernje novosti and Politika) and the news agency Tanjug, in addition to the public broadcasting service. Considering that these print media also have their online portals, the state appears to be the only media owner actively operating in all four media sectors in the country (TV, radio, print and online).³³ When it comes to the national TV broadcasters (public and private), alternative reports state that the government and people linked to it have full control over them,³⁴ holding a 63.33% share of the total TV audience.³⁵ Plurality of thought offered to Serbian citizens is thus questionable. With such a wide reach, the government can easily impose the messages it seeks to spread across the country. This leads to covers, in this case of Večernje Novosti, with headlines like “Half of the world is bleeding due to America’s greed” or “No one will get us into a fight with Russia”.³⁶

33 Intervju Tanja Maksić: Kontrola medija u Srbiji je velika, Novi Magazin, Belgrade, Serbia, 21 July 2019, <https://bit.ly/2OUGNjS>

34 Media Ownership Monitor Serbia, “National TV Stations in the Service of the Government”, <https://bit.ly/2WEIvt4>

35 Media Ownership Monitor Serbia, “TV Market”, <https://bit.ly/36edzSP>

36 Večernje novosti daily cover, 24 November 2019, <https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/info/prelistavanje-dnevnih-novina-za-24-novembar-2019-godine-2019-11-23>

Figure 2 Cover of Večernje Novosti daily, 24 November 2019



Another problem in Serbia is that with over 2,000 registered media on the one hand³⁷ and the insufficient media market value on the other,³⁸ outlets are increasingly vulnerable to state funding. Forms of transactions range from public calls to the co-financing of media projects and from public procurement of media services to direct advertising contracts etc. Such financial dependence leaves room for the authorities to apply latent pressure on editors. For example, journalists report that funds for co-financing media projects of public interest have been awarded in a non-transparent way, often to pro-regime and tabloid media that are known for breaking the journalists' code.³⁹

37 Business Registers Agency, <https://apr.gov.rs/%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%B0.3.html>

38 Some estimations of annual advertising revenue in the media sector ranges €180 million–€200 million. IREX (2019), "Media Sustainability Index – Serbia", p. 2, <https://bit.ly/33XljpU>

39 Dragana Bajić, Vanja Dolapčev, Milena Lazarević, "Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM): Serbia Design Report 2018–2020", Open Government Partnership, p. 33, https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Serbia_Design_Report_2018-2020_EN.pdf

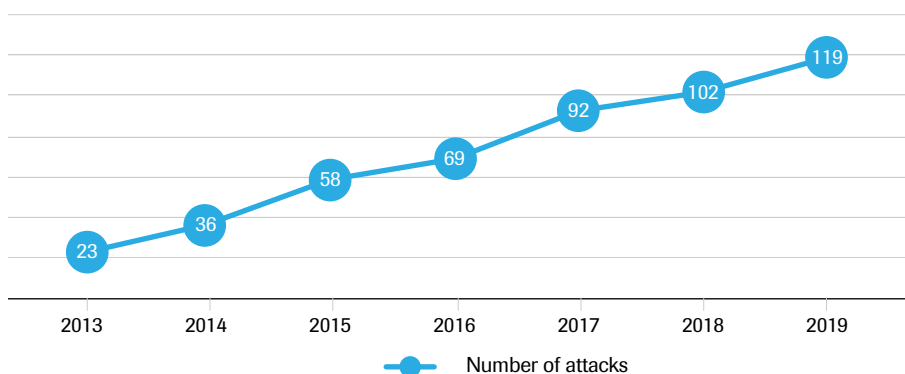
The media ownership problem, combined with the fragile economic sustainability of media outlets, makes the mainstream journalistic profession in Serbia susceptible to government bias. As stated by an interviewed journalist, the “wage for fear” is too small for many media workers, making them lose motivation to fight for freedom of information and their own personal freedom.⁴⁰

The contributors

A number of other issues related to the overall media landscape in Serbia add to the environment in which impartial reporting comes at a high price for the stability and security of journalists’ jobs. This section analyses just some of the outstanding issues: threats, pressure and violence towards journalists; the impunity phenomenon; and tax audit abuse. By setting an unfavourable context for the conduct of journalism in the country, these problems indirectly contribute to the spread of media bias.

Threats, attacks and intimidation of journalists and other media workers are continuous. According to the Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia, the number of attacks (including physical attacks, attacks on property, verbal threats and pressure) is increasing, with a recent severe case of an investigative journalist’s home being broken into in October 2019.⁴¹ Pro-regime media engage in smear cases and verbal attacks, but legal remedies are limited.⁴²

Figure 3 Attacks on journalists in Serbia



Source: Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia, database of attacks on journalists by year

⁴⁰ Interview conducted in August 2019.

⁴¹ Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia Databases, “Detalji napada na novinare” <https://bit.ly/2qrVXsi>

⁴² Interview with an investigative journalist, August 2019, Belgrade.

Digital threats to independent journalism are equally worrying. One monitor showed that journalists are the most frequent targets of violations of digital rights and freedoms in Serbia.⁴³ The European Commission has therefore called upon the Serbian authorities to make serious efforts to identify and prosecute “those suspected of violating internet freedoms, as well as those using social media to intimidate and threaten journalists”.⁴⁴ Verbal harassment by online accounts is very often gender-based, which has compelled the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network to start tracking stories of female journalists who faced online violence.⁴⁵ Additionally, some members of the current government have publicly cited the names of particular journalists in press statements, making them direct targets for online hate speech. Interviewed journalists stated that this practice was very unpleasant and at times frightening to them.⁴⁶ Larger independent media outlets have fundraising and legal capacities to invest in protection software, but the problem lies with small, local media, which usually struggle to afford expensive cybersecurity experts or technical solutions. These examples show not only the growing problem of digital security impeding professional journalism, but also the multidimensional nature of the costs of pursuing a journalistic career in Serbia.

The government is suing us. It makes us pay seemingly random tax bills. It follows us with intelligence agents and publishes fake stories in pro-government media about us. It even created a fake network of investigative reporters who only seem to investigate us and other so-called enemies of the state. KRIK (Crime and Corruption Reporting Network) team members are under court proceedings now. Threats have been sent to our newsroom. And the homes of two of our reporters were broken into and we have been targets of surveillance by the secret service for a long time. They published lies about me on the front pages of Serbian leading media. It feels like it was never as hard as today to tell the truth.

Source: Stevan Dojčinović, KRIK (Crime and Corruption Reporting Network), source: AJ+ <https://bit.ly/2OBOE4z>

43 Share Foundation, Monitoring Labs, <http://monitoring.labs.rs/>

44 European Commission (2019), “Commission Staff Working Document: Serbia 2019 Report”, Brussels, 29 May 2019

SWD (2019) 219 final, p. 25, <https://bit.ly/2OU5ayi>

45 See more at Balkan Insight, “Female Journalists Attacked Online: Share Your Stories”, 18 June 2019 <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/18/female-journalists-attacked-online-share-your-stories/>

46 Interview conducted in August 2019.

Even when journalists report violence, most cases end up without investigations and convictions. There is systematic negligence of this problem, reflected in the lack of political will and low institutional capacities to deal with the problem. In many cases, investigative journalists, i.e. the victims, are the ones doing the data collection for the prosecution authorities, but the process ends without any action taken.⁴⁷ Journalists believe that causes of impunity lie in the political influence over public authorities and links between authorities and protected crime groups.⁴⁸ In this sense, punishment for perpetrators is important but does not solve the systemic problem. Knowing that culprits are rarely brought to justice, journalists feel discouraged from reporting new harassments and attacks.

We spent hours with the police submitting evidence to help the investigation, but we never received any meaningful information years later.

An interviewed journalist

The sustainability of independent media is further harmed by administrative-institutional pressure, such as tax authority abuse. Daily visits from tax inspectors to media outlets can last for weeks, completely occupying the newsrooms and preventing employees from performing their jobs. This happened in 2017 to the local weekly Vranjske, which soon after closed the business despite a large protest by the media community, because they could no longer withstand the pressure.⁴⁹

The novel coronavirus crisis has revived the discussion in society, but primarily within the government, on what constitutes information as against disinformation. The government issued a decision (which was withdrawn shortly afterwards) banning the dissemination of information on COVID-19 in Serbia by sources other than the core government crisis response team, headed by the Prime Minister. Expert observers considered that this centralisation of information represented a drastic violation of freedom of expression, freedom of the media and the right to be informed.⁵⁰ Furthermore, a journalist was held in 48-hour police detention for allegedly spreading panic due to an article on the lack of medical equipment and unprotected medical staff in one of Serbia's hospitals.⁵¹ Serbian CSOs asserted that "such treatment of journalists

47 Interviews conducted in August 2019.

48 Ibid.

49 Julija Simić, "Serbian media under political pressure", Euractiv.com, 21 September 2017, <https://bit.ly/3e7Jp8E>

50 Nenad Nešić, "Struka upozorava: Centralizovanje informisanja je kršenje Ustava i zakona", RS.N1INFO.COM, 1 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3c5Mg0i>

51 "Novinarke portala Nova.rs određeno zadržavanje do 48 sati", RS.N1INFO.COM, 2 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Rj20F2>

not only represents a violation of media freedom, but creates an intimidating effect for all journalists in Serbia”.⁵² These examples additionally showcase the vulnerability of the media in the extraordinary circumstances.

All the issues mentioned lead to censorship and self-censorship in the mainstream media in Serbia. Interviewed journalists confirmed this unanimously. Journalists resort massively to softening their tone and approach, making compromises for the sake of their personal and professional sustainability. This points to a link between the severe condition of the journalistic profession today and the quality of reporting. It therefore comes as no surprise that reporting, including on foreign actors, becomes poor and biased.

52 “Institucije države da se bore protiv koronavirusa, a ne slobode medija”, Eukonvent.org, <https://bit.ly/3e3VJXz>

4 The EU: defender of media freedom in Serbia?

As the previous sections have shown, media freedom in Serbia is under threat, leading to tough conditions for journalists seeking to perform their jobs independently. This impacts how Serbian media report on foreign actors, notably the EU, US and Russia. Since media freedom is, as an extension of freedom of expression, an integral part of the EU's values, the Union has an interest in addressing media freedom issues in Serbia for both normative and self-interested reasons. In other words, media freedom in Serbia is an essential topic for the EU because it is closely related to the core values of the EU itself, but also because the EU has an interest in adequate and open reporting on the EU and the accession process. This section outlines the extent to which the EU actively addresses the issue, discussing the four branches of the EU's activities with regard to media freedom in enlargement countries: i) providing legal assistance with drafting media legislation; ii) providing (financial) support through Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance programmes; iii) monitoring the adoption of the acquis and drafting yearly country reports on the overall accession progress; and iv) political communication.⁵³ While exploratory in nature, the section researches the extent to which the EU efforts are effective in supporting free and independent media.

Media freedom, the EU accession process and political signalling

When it comes to the overall accession process, various scholars argue that EU norm diffusion is less effective in areas where the EU has no or little acquis. That may be the case because in such areas there is no clear specification of what the norm or value entails, and key issues related to the norm are spread over different chapters.⁵⁴ The area of media freedom can be considered an example, given that the EU acquis features

53 European Commission DG NEAR, Freedom of expression and media, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/policy-highlights/freedom-of-expression-and-media_en

54 See: Börzel & Schimmelfennig (2017), Coming together or drifting apart? The EU's political integration capacity in Eastern Europe, *Journal of European Public Policy*, p. 281; EU democracy promotion in the Neighbourhood: From leverage to governance? Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2011, p. 896.

few common regulations on the issue (and it is hence mainly a national competence)⁵⁵. As such, the negotiating chapters, which are based on the EU's acquis, barely deal with media freedom directly. Instead, various chapters, such as those on public procurement, competition policy, consumer protection and financial control, touch upon the issue only indirectly. It is only in chapter 23 on freedom of expression and fundamental rights that issues pertaining to media freedom are explicitly discussed. This means media freedom as such is “not necessarily the most central element of establishing compliance with EU norms”.⁵⁶ That has a real effect on the capacity of the EU to spur reforms in the media sector, both within the EU itself and in aspiring members.

EU Media freedom Benchmarks for Serbia as outlined in the EU common position on chapter 23:

- Serbia fully respects the independence of media, applies a zero-tolerance policy as regards threats and attacks against journalists, and prioritising criminal investigations should such cases occur. Serbia provides an initial track record of progress in the work of the “Commission for consideration of the facts that were obtained in the investigations that were conducted on the killings of journalists” including further investigations, effective prosecution and deterrent sanctions for perpetrators.
- Through the implementation of the Strategy for the Development of Public Information System, Serbia takes active measures for reforming its media landscape thus creating an enabling environment for freedom of expression, based on transparency (including on ownership of media), integrity and pluralism.

Source: Council of the European Union (2016), European Union Common Position on Chapter 23, https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/pristupni_pregovori/pregovaracke_pozicije/Ch23%20EU%20Common%20Position.pdf

55 These are limited to the Audiovisual Media Services Directive and the Communication from the Commission on the application of State aid rules to public service broadcasting. See: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/press_corner/elarg-guidelines-for-media-freedom-and-integrity_210214.pdf, p. 1.

56 European Parliament DG EXPO (2014), Freedom of Media in the Western Balkans, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2014/534982/EXPO_STU\(2014\)534982_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2014/534982/EXPO_STU(2014)534982_EN.pdf), p. 25.

The effect of that is indeed observable in various EU documents that are part of the accession process with Serbia, including through a lack of detailed benchmarks, a lack of deep analysis, fragmentation and sections devoted to the issue being relatively concise and/or general. The 2014 EC screening report for chapter 23 and the EU's 2016 common position (establishing interim benchmarks),⁵⁷ for example, only devote relatively concise sections to media freedom, with the latter outlining two interim benchmarks out of a total of 13 on fundamental rights, compared to tens of benchmarks on the judiciary and the fight against corruption. Judging not only by the numbers but also by the experience of Serbian media stakeholders, EC benchmarking on media freedom has been ineffective and subordinate to political issues.⁵⁸ The European Commission country reports for Serbia, which are the most visible accounts of how the EC assesses Serbia's progress in the accession process, also suffer from fragmentation and a lack of detailed analysis. Issues related to media freedom such as threats against journalists, a lack of transparency in media ownership and interference by authorities are all explicitly addressed, but without much detail about how they should be resolved. For example, in the 2019 report the Commission notes only that Serbia has to fully implement legislation on the media sector that provides for more stringent criteria on the transparency of media ownership. Even less direction is given in the section on intimidation of journalists, where the Commission asks for fair and timely prosecution but does not directly relate the issue to political influence over the judiciary. While that issue is dealt with in other sections, it would be opportune, in order to mark the severity of the media freedom issue, if explicit references were made, given that, as the first section of this paper outlined, journalists suspect it is an important reason for impunity in cases of harassment and violence.⁵⁹

Similarly, the 2014 *Guidelines for EU support to media freedom and media integrity in enlargement countries* document does not indicate how EU actions will contribute to the objectives stated in the results framework.⁶⁰ The biannual European Commission non-papers on Serbia's progress in chapter 23 do provide more detailed analyses of

57 Council of the European Union (2016), European Union Common Position on Chapter 23, https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/pristupni_pregovori/pregovaracke_pozicije/Ch23%20EU%20Common%20Position.pdf; European Commission (2014), Screening report Serbia, Chapter 23 – Judiciary and Fundamental rights, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2014/140729-screening-report-chapter-23-serbia.pdf.

58 Sena Marić & Dragana Bajić (2018), 'EU's Benchmarking within Chapters 23 and 24 in Accession Negotiations with Serbia - Effect and Challenges', *CEP Report*, <https://cep.org.rs/en/publications/eus-benchmarking-within-chapters-23-and-24-in-accession-negotiations-with-serbia/>, p. 18.

59 European Commission progress report for Serbia 2019, SWD(2019) 219 final, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-serbia-report.pdf>, pp. 24–25.

60 European Commission DG Enlargement (2014). Guidelines for EU support to media freedom and media integrity in enlargement countries, 2014–2020, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/press_corner/elarg-guidelines-for-media-freedom-and-integrity_210214.pdf, p. 6.

the media freedom situation, but do not explicitly assess progress in relation to the set benchmarks.⁶¹ More detailed assessments may exist, but are not publicly available, meaning there is no possibility to check.⁶² Hence there is room for improvement in both prioritisation and communication about the problems at hand and setting clear benchmarks on how they should be resolved.

Although there seems to be room for improvement on the EU side, the effectiveness of this “political signalling” (conveying political messages to Serbia’s authorities), either in the EC’s country reports or in public comments by EU officials, also depends on the overall leverage of the EU on Serbian politicians, in turn determined by political will for deep reform in the country itself. The same goes for the effectiveness of legal assistance, given that the adoption of adequate legislation does not necessarily lead to improved practices. Research has shown that EU-required reforms are more likely to be fully accepted by aspiring countries if credible incentives are offered and domestic adoption costs are low.⁶³ For the Serbian government, such adoption costs could be considerable, however, as fully independent media may affect its power position.

Moreover, Serbia manages to partially avoid the costs of non-adoption because the EU is not the “only game in town” in the country: while absolute ties with the EU (trade, investment, travel) are the strongest by a considerable margin, the Serbian government in its public discourse increasingly presents China as its go-to partner, as well as retains ties with Russia. This multivector foreign policy still allows the country to partially avoid the “sticks” attached to the “carrots” the EU offers.⁶⁴ Political will to implement real reforms therefore remains largely absent. It is therefore highly uncertain whether Serbia’s media strategy, which was adopted in January 2020 and welcomed by the EU, will also effect change in practice.

Lastly, this political signalling depends on the EU’s own credibility. The performance of several EU Member States on media freedom is worrisome and showing a negative

61 Sena Marić & Dragana Bajić (2018), ‘EU’s Benchmarking within Chapters 23 and 24 in Accession Negotiations with Serbia - Effect and Challenges’, *CEP Report*, <https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Benchmarking-in-Serbia-1-1.pdf>, p. 7; See for example the European Commission non-paper on the state of play regarding chapters 23 and 24 for Serbia, November 2019, available on the website of the Serbian ministry of European Integration: https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu_dokumenta/non_paper_23_24/non_paper_23_24_19.pdf

62 This concerns expert reports drafted by EU envoys, which are only shared with the Serbian Government. See Sena Marić & Dragana Bajić (2018), ‘EU’s Benchmarking within Chapters 23 and 24 in Accession Negotiations with Serbia - Effect and Challenges’, *CEP Report*, <https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Benchmarking-in-Serbia-1-1.pdf>, p. 7.

63 Beáta Huszka (2019). ‘Human Rights on the Losing end of EU Enlargement: The Case of Serbia’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 56(2), p. 353.

64 See forthcoming Clingendael report (July 2020) on China and the Western Balkans.

trend, as confirmed by the 2020 World Press Freedom Index. Malta (in 81st place) and Hungary (in 89th place) find themselves very close to Serbia (in 93rd place), and Bulgaria scores even worse (in 111th place). So far, the EU has not been capable of countering downward trends in its Member States, which undermines the credibility of its messages towards Serbia and the other accession candidates.⁶⁵ The issue therefore appears even greater when placed in the context of the enlargement process, which itself is constantly evolving in terms of requirements and as such poses a challenge for both the EU and candidates. The fact that media freedom remains largely national law means the EU struggles to find the right tools to address this issue, despite the centrality of media freedom as an extension of freedom of expression in the values of the Union.

As such, while there is room for stronger political signalling and stronger prioritisation, it needs to be acknowledged that media freedom will in the short to medium term remain one of the issues where the EU, both internally and in the enlargement process, due to lack of competences, faces an expectations-capability gap that is not easily resolvable. At the same time, given that several EU Member States (including the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and Portugal) find themselves in the top 10 of the 2020 media freedom index,⁶⁶ there are good prospects for them, in alignment with the overall EU objectives, to employ bilateral ties to support the development of the media sector and retain political emphasis on the issue.

(Financial) support for media in Serbia

Given the stated limits of political signalling to Serbia, directly financing and supporting (investigative) media to foster their (financial) independence may have more impact in fostering media freedom and pluralism. The EU in total contributed about EUR 5.2 million between 2014 and 2020 to support media freedom in Serbia, as well as EUR 12.7 million to support regional initiatives (see text box). For the other Western Balkan countries, country support totalled EUR 8.5 million, meaning Serbia is the biggest recipient of such funds.⁶⁷ While the European Commission boasts that these funds are substantial, a number of remarks can be made about their size and nature.

First, EUR 4.6 million for media freedom in Serbia from IPA over a period of seven years is not a very large sum when put in perspective. Overall, EU financial assistance to Serbia under the Instrument for Pre-accession II (IPA II) totalled EUR 1.5 billion between 2014 and 2020, including EUR 246 million for the Rule of Law and fundamental rights.

65 Reporters Without Borders, 2020 World Press Freedom Index, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

66 Ibid.

67 European Commission (2019). Factsheet: EU support to media in the Western Balkans, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/media_days_factsheet.pdf

As such, media freedom constitutes just 0.31% of overall funds, or 1.87% of funds allocated to the Rule of Law and fundamental rights. For a sector that constitutes an essential part of a functioning democracy, that is not a lot. Moreover, the fact that the EU is able, within two weeks, to reallocate from unspent and unprogrammed IPA II funds a EUR 93 million aid package for Serbia to counter the coronavirus outbreak, places the sums allocated to media freedom in the country in further perspective. While not seeking to engage in a discussion on whether media freedom should prevail over public health, the discrepancy in allocations makes clear that, based on finances, media freedom cannot be regarded as an EU priority.

Figure 4 EU support to media freedom in Serbia⁶⁸

1 EU funding for Serbia:
EUR 5.2 million

IPA funding:

EUR 2.2 million IPA Civil Society Facility and Media Programme's grants for investigative journalism

EUR 697.000 Technical assistance contracts with the public broadcasters RTS and RTV

EUR 299.923 Strengthening capacities of the Press Council

EUR 1.2 million Pulse of Europe - Media trips to the EU (new)

EUR 300.000 Strengthening freedom of expression and quality journalism in the digital environment in partnership with the OSCE (new)

Joint funding with other partners:

EUR 585.000 Freedom of expression and freedom of the media in Serbia (JUFREX) (Funded under the joint programme of the Council of Europe and the EU)

2 EU funding for regional initiatives:
EUR 5.2 million

EUR 1.2 million Network of Journalist Associations (ended)

EUR 2.5 million Reinforcing Judicial Expertise

EUR 1.5 million Building Trust in Media

EUR 1.5 million Support to Public Service Media

EUR 4 million Targeted Media Support

EUR 2 million Improving Quality and Professionalism in Journalism

68 Sources for text box 'EU support to media freedom in Serbia': European Commission (2019). Factsheet: EU support to media in the Western Balkans, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/media_days_factsheet.pdf; European Commission (2018), EU support to Media in the Western Balkans, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180914_wb_media_days_factsheet.pdf; EU Delegation to Serbia (20-07-2019), EU Role in Promoting Freedom of Expression, <http://europa.rs/eu-role-in-promoting-freedom-of-expression/?lang=en>; EU Delegation to Serbia (25-02-2020), Pulse of Europe - Media Trips to the EU, <https://europa.rs/pulse-of-europe-media-trips-to-the-eu/?lang=en>.

Second, and more importantly, funds provided by the EU are not properly curbing systemic problems in Serbia's media sector today. That is because while the EU has granted technical assistance contracts worth EUR 697,200.00 to the two public broadcasters RTS and RTV, with the aim of strengthening the role of public service media and increasing the professionalism of journalists, political influence continues to hamper their impartiality. The RTS Managing Council, for example, has close links to the ruling party, which seems to explain the broadcasters' tendency to avoid reporting on societal problems.⁶⁹ The problem is the same as with technical assistance – the benefits of funding these organisations without a conducive overall environment are limited. In particular, contributing to professionalism of journalists has substantial limits if political influence continues to fuel dynamics of clientelism and (self-)censorship. More efforts need to be redirected to making sure that the regulatory framework ensuring independence is not only present but also actively complied with, but it should be acknowledged that much depends again on the effectiveness of political signalling and hence on genuine political will in Serbia itself. There are therefore limits to what the EU can do and a clear-cut solution is not easily obtainable.

Third, as the previous sections of this paper have shown, media in Serbia overall are still largely dependent on government funding. As independent investigative media are not able to attract such funding, it is welcome that the EU has currently issued nine ongoing grants that have been predominantly allocated to investigative journalism projects. These nine grants have been financed by the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) "Civil Society Facility and Media Programme" (CSF) in Serbia, with a total of approximately EUR 2.3 million.⁷⁰ Besides the EUR 2.3 million for individual projects, the EU also contributes EUR 1.2 million to the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS), allowing journalists among others to travel to EU countries.⁷¹ On a regional level, similar support exists, contributing among others to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN). These grants provided through IPA's CSF have a positive impact and make journalistic investigations possible on key topics. For example, the "Reveal and Heal" project supports journalists who are part of the KRIK investigative network in monitoring corruption in the judiciary and developing a database on members of the judiciary and their assets.⁷² The EU support is mostly project-based,

69 Media Ownership Monitor Serbia, RTS1, <https://serbia.mom-rsf.org/en/media/detail/outlet/rtts-1/>

70 EU Delegation to Serbia, EU Role in Promoting Freedom of Expression, <http://europa.rs/eu-role-in-promoting-freedom-of-expression/?lang=en>.

71 EU Delegation to Serbia, Pulse of Europe – Media Trips to the EU, <https://europa.rs/pulse-of-europe-media-trips-to-the-eu/?lang=en>.

72 Reveal and heal – investigative journalism as a cure for corruption in judiciary, 'about project', <http://reveal-and-heal.euzatebe.rs/en/about-project> (accessed 11 June 2020); See for results, for example, KRIK's coverage of the Darko Šarić criminal case, to be found online (in Serbian): <https://www.krik.rs/tag/sudenje-saricu/> (accessed 11 June 2020).

however. This means that it does not contribute to creating a sustainable business model for independent media organisations. The EU does offer start-up funding for new media outlets as well as core and bridge funding⁷³, but in our research of ongoing projects, no projects specifically designed to create long-term financial independence from single government and/or political actors were found. What is lacking is assistance for independent media in diversifying their income, e.g. through non-project-based grants, and by offering best practices to attract investors and create profitable subscription models.

In conclusion, measures financing media to foster their professionalism and independence are promising, but their financial size is relatively small compared to the EU's overall investments in the fields of rule of law and human rights. Moreover, their overall effectiveness is closely connected to the environment for the media at large. Lastly, measures could be better focussed on creating sustainable business models for independent media organisations.

73 European Commission (2018). Factsheet: EU support to media in the Western Balkans, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180914_wb_media_days_factsheet.pdf.

5 Conclusion and recommendations

In the context of the global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus, media stand out as a crucial pillar ensuring the right to information and freedom of expression. Media freedom is essential to ensure that the information citizens receive via the media is well substantiated, truthful and unbiased. In crisis circumstances, countering disinformation and the spreads of fake news is therefore paramount.

This report has outlined how foreign policy biases in reporting in Serbia result from the lack of media freedom in the country. The overall quality of media reporting about foreign actors in Serbia is low, as reflected in a lack of substantive debate and/or credible sources in reporting. More specifically, in terms of thematic scope, the EU integration process receives less attention in the mainstream media than other topics related to the EU, Russia or the United States. As a result, such reporting risks negatively impacting public opinion on EU membership. These issues can be directly related to characteristics of the media landscape in Serbia. Media ownership is still insufficiently transparent, and the media privatisation process remains unfinished. Many media outlets are also dependent on the state for their financing due to low economic sustainability. These factors allow the Serbian government to informally steer and influence the content and tone of publications, leading to dynamics of (self-) censorship and biased reporting. Threats, pressure and violence towards independent journalism, the impunity phenomenon and tax audit abuse further set an unfavourable context for the conduct of journalism in Serbia, adding to the lack of media freedom in the country.

Given these issues, the EU has an interest in tackling media freedom both for self-interested reasons and for reasons stemming from its value base. While the head of the EU delegation in Serbia noted recently that “freedom of media is one of the key topics in the accession process and I constantly advocate the improvement in that area”, it seems more can be done to place the issue in a more central position in the EU approach towards Serbia.⁷⁴ It cannot be said that the EU is inactive in the field, and support is provided in many ways. What seems to be missing is an overarching, coherent and detailed EU strategy for tackling media freedom issues that receives clear priority on both the technical and political levels.

74 N1 (25-02-2020), ‘Fabrizi: Media freedom key issue, we’ll carefully monitor situation in Serbia’, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a572535/EU-will-carefully-monitor-media-scene-in-Serbia.html>

Placing media freedom in a more central position and addressing the fragmentation in the EU approach towards Serbia would help to unlock the full potential of the different instruments the EU employs. While measures financing media to foster their professionalism and independence are promising, their overall effectiveness is closely connected to the environment for the media at large. Contributing to a more conducive environment for independent and plural media hence requires a continuous effort at all levels, combining support for media organisations and journalists within Serbia with sufficient political pressure and reform incentives for the Serbian government. The revised accession methodology is promising in this respect, given that it attaches more significance to political steering and a stronger focus on fundamental reforms. It has been welcomed by the Serbian expert community, civil society and informally by the country's president, although not yet formally by the Serbian government.⁷⁵

It should be noted that the EU's individual efforts to tackle the lack of media freedom in Serbia may be promising and could foster changes for the better. Considering that the Serbian government has been simulating reform despite EU conditionality, the EU should take a further step beyond annual progress assessment or periodic condemnations. Embarking upon stronger initiatives to improve the media landscape would inevitably lead to increased impartiality of reporting, sustainability of media outlets and strengthening of journalists' integrity. This would provide an environment more resistant to government-sponsored biases in the media and an environment that nurtures debate, dialogue and deliberation on foreign policy issues. Considering that media content has a strong impact on public perception, the EU could demonstrate a greater interest in promoting and protecting free, ethical and professional media, and would be well advised to critically examine the level of priority the issue has received, and the coherence between its different initiatives.

The EU Member States and the EU institutions could take the following actions to improve the media situation in Serbia:

- Continued political signalling (conveying political messages to Serbian authorities) on all levels and by all EU and EU Member State interlocutors is needed to sustain sufficient pressure on Serbian political elites to engage in deep reform and ensure implementation of adopted regulations, especially in the media sector.
- To complement effective political signalling, the EU accession benchmarks on the issues related to the media could be specified in a way that includes indicators focused on outcomes, thus discouraging the government from issuing overly

75 RTS (2020), *Vučić o pregovorima sa EU: Moje simpatije na strani nove metodologije*, <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3842289/vucic-o-pregovorima-sa-eu-mozemo-da-biramo-postojeci-okvir-ili-nova-metodologija.html>

descriptive reports on progress in meeting benchmarks and motivating it to provide clear and measurable evidence and track records.

- The EU country reports could provide further detail in outlining media freedom issues in Serbia, referring to clear benchmarks as discussed in the point above. The sections on media freedom could furthermore be linked more explicitly to other issues mentioned throughout the country reports, for example political influence over public authorities.
- The EU could increase the budget available for tackling media freedom issues so as to better underpin its political signalling that media freedom is a key factor in the EU accession process that is already partially present. This is even more important in the context of challenges that media face when reporting on Serbia's response to COVID-19. Part of the EU funds designated for Serbia's COVID-19 response could therefore be reserved for media empowerment.
- The EU could further step up its assistance for independent media in developing sustainable business models. It could do so by increasing start-up, bridge and core funding it already provides, as well as by sharing best practices and facilitating exchanges with journalists and others working in the media sector within the EU.
- The EU Member States are well placed to actively contribute to the EU's objectives on media freedom in the accession process. In particular, those countries in the EU that are leading the way when it comes to media freedom could consider stepping up investments in media freedom in Serbia through bilateral programmes aligned with overall EU objectives. They are also advised to make use of the enhanced room provided by the revised accession methodology to Member States for monitoring reform progress in the WB6, including on Media Freedom-related issues.
- Lastly, to ensure full socialisation with EU norms and values on freedom of expression and media, the EU could introduce post-accession mechanisms in the rule of law area as a condition for accessing EU structural funds, which would stimulate governments to think long-term and already start showing clear results of the commitment to improve media freedom. This would also decrease the risk of new (and existing) Member States degrading standards attained during the accession process.