

“Support to the inclusive and transparent development of Media Strategy”

Consultants: Saša Mirković/Dragan Janjić

The publication of this paper was supported by the Royal Norwegian Embassy and the OSCE Mission to Serbia. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position of the Royal Norwegian Embassy or the OSCE Mission to Serbia.

Contents:

1. Analysis of Media Strategy development process (Strategy for the Development of Public Information System, for the period 2020 – 2025)	04
2. Analysis of Media Strategy content	09
3. Analysis of Media Strategy implementation	15
4. Analysis Media Strategy implementation during COVID-19 epidemic	17
5. Conclusion	41
6. Monitoring of Media Strategy implementation based on Action Plan	48

14 February – 7 May 2020

1. Analysis of Media Strategy development process (Strategy for the Development of Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2020 – 2025)

The Strategy for the Development of Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2020 – 2025 (hereinafter: Media Strategy) was adopted at the Government of the Republic of Serbia's session on 30 January 2020, with increasingly higher political tensions between those in power and their opponents going full blast and being accompanied with a noticeable absence of social dialogue about crucial political problems and a growing number of complaints about different forms of interference with editorial policy of media houses.

These circumstances inevitably affected the multiyear work on Media Strategy development. The consequences of such environment included the fact that the completion of work on Strategy was for the most part marked with a three-year delay. Namely, validity period of the previous strategy was 2011 - 2016, which means that new strategic document should have been adopted already in the beginning of 2017. At the time when this analysis is written, the work on the development of the Action Plan is drawing to a close. According to Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, it should be adopted before 16 May 2020.

Line Minister Vladan Vukosavljević and State Secretary for Media Nino Brajović came into office in August and December 2016, respectively, but it was not before the middle of July 2017 that the Working Group for the development of new media strategy was set up in the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Government of the Republic of Serbia. Coordination of the fifteen-member Working Group was entrusted to Miloš Janković, then Assistant to the Information Minister.

The intention was that the Strategy text development process is inclusive and transparent, and it was expected that this would be ensured through the participation of the representatives of relevant journalists' and media associations whose activity was supported by OSCE Mission to Serbia and the representatives of the EU Delegation. Their active participation, however, failed to bridge the initially existing chasm and massive

distrust between the representatives of the government on one hand, and the representative and oldest media and journalists' associations, on the other hand. Stark disagreements led the representatives of media groups to withdraw from the Working Group, although left short-staffed, proceeded to complete the Draft Media Strategy.

The way this strategic document was drafted and its content were critical elements that triggered its formal delegitimization in the spring of 2018. The meeting between President Vučić and OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Harlem Désir in April 2018 in Belgrade denoted the formal end of the process which was participated by the Ministry of Culture and Information, including State Secretary for Media Aleksandar Gajović who was leading the process at the time.

The proactive role of Prime Minister Ana Branabić, with the intermediation of OSCE, contributed to the re-establishment of a dialogue with relevant organisations and associations. In June 2018 a new working group for the development of Media Strategy was set up in the Prime Minister's Office. The Media Department of OSCE Mission to Serbia, supported by the EU Delegation and a number of donors, provided expert assistance in the process of developing the new text of the strategy. After a public debate was held, the Working Group, with the support of local experts, completed the text of new media strategy in the end of April 2019. This signalled that mutual distrust between the partners developing the document had been dissolved, by joint effort.

Regrettably, trust was again seriously impaired in the middle of 2019 when it was found that a version of media strategy that was sent from the Government of the Republic of Serbia to the European Commission differed from the version made by the Working Group. To be precise, parts of the text relating to Regulatory body for Electronic Media (REM), public media services, the Press Council, and media outlets founded by national councils of national minorities, were significantly changed or completely removed from this document. Despite the apologies for this major omission that Prime Minister Brnabić made afterwards, no official clarification ensued as regards who made these subsequent changes and who sent the disputable text to Brussels.

The very fact that the adopted document was subsequently interfered with gave rise to huge dissatisfaction among the members of the Working Group coming from journalists'

and media associations, as well as among the OSCE representatives of international community and the European Union who had been, until then, overseeing the overall Media Strategy development process. Even though Prime Minister Ana Brnabić had declared in summer that the European Commission was forwarded the unconsolidated version of the above document by mistake, the fact remains that this did not disperse the suspicion that it was an attempted manipulation. Thanks to the international intermediators, communication with the Prime Minister's Office was not interrupted before the middle of September 2019 when a joint meeting was held between the members of the Working Group and Prime Minister Brnabić at which she apologised for this omission. In the months that followed, the document was sent back for 'factory-made' adjustment, i.e. to be restored to the version that was consolidated earlier. In this way the joint efforts to develop the document were brought to an end in a relatively peaceful atmosphere and with the participation of the representatives of all relevant journalists' organisations and media associations. The consolidated version of Media Strategy that the Government of the Republic of Serbia sent to Brussels was given positive assessment by the European Commission and the preconditions were thus created for it to be finally adopted in January 2020.

Soon after that, the Working Group composed of the same members started to work on the development of an action plan. Statutory timeline for action plan development in normal circumstances is three months. Considering that, due to the state of emergency that was declared, new elections at national and local levels were postponed and then scheduled for June, the completion of the Media Strategy coincides with the technical mandate period of the Government. All this will have an impact on the actual Action Plan adoption date.

The finishing of work on the text of Media Strategy happened concurrently with political tensions relating to scheduling the above elections. The failed multi-month inter-party dialogue that involved international mediators, local experts, and representatives of media groups, ended in electoral boycott by a major part of key opposition parties which were dissatisfied with electoral conditions. Media freedoms which are principally dealt by Media Strategy were in the core of their dissatisfaction, as was the absence of practical implementation of the existing media legislative framework which was adopted within the mandate period of the present Government.

Adopting of Media Strategy and ensuring that Regulatory Body for Electronic Media is fully-staffed (instead of replacing all members as it was requested by the opposition) by following the “3+2” formula (elect three lacking, and replace two existing REM members) proved not to be enough to amortise the escalated political discontent which resulted in boycott decision. This decision was not met with understanding by the international community whose representatives interpreted the inclusive and transparent Media Strategy adoption process as an argument demonstrating that the Government is prepared to respond to the requests of the criticism-prone parties and their future voters.

This debate did not sidestep the media community which had taken part in creating the strategic media document. Prevailing opinion among the most relevant journalists’ and media associations whose representatives were members of the Working Group for many years was that the representatives of the government tried (and for the most part succeeded) to internationally present the adoption of Media Strategy as a brilliant success.

The readiness of the government to cooperate, reflected in it incorporating many allegations made by the dissenting members of the Working Group about the results of (non-)implementation of the previous Media Strategy for the period 2011 - 2016 in the government document certainly helped to create this impression. Although seemingly cathartic, this government’s inventory of its own mistakes and serious omissions was perceived as an example of political pragmatism on its part and motivated the frustrated media community to, for the sake of believing that it would be less damaging to participate than to passively observe, get involved in the process in which it was relatively abused. Open and well-argued criticism of the implementation of previous Strategy *per se* do not offer sufficient guarantees that lessons have been learnt and that no omissions and mistakes will be repeated in the implementation of new strategic document. The organisations and associations are well aware of this fact; they admit that this document is a ‘wish list’ encapsulated into a sum of commitments and goals which can only be a foundation for the amendment, adoption, and subsequent implementation of new legal framework for media. Having in mind past experience, implementation of the new measure cannot be expected to have an impact before 2022.

Until then, the escalated problems may be remedied through the implementation of existing media laws which have not yet been fully implemented although they were adopted almost six years ago. The creators of Media Strategy are well aware of this fact. They agree that the adoption of the Strategy is an important step and that legal regulations should be improved and modernised, noting that only full implementation of existing legal framework will enable further promotion of media freedoms in this territory.

During the course of Media Strategy development, journalists never ceased to call attention to the ever-growing interference from the government. The ruling structures managed to maintain and enlarge their influence on the most prominent media which are source of information for the majority population and which marginalise or bury the information, views, and opinions which deviate from the positions of the ruling elite. A proof of this the harsh campaign that is run against those media and individuals who are not controlled by the government.

Freedom of speech is not improving at the pace and in the manner that are fitting to a democratic society and this can be largely blamed on the government which does not show sincere desire or ambition to actually improve the present situation. No wonder then that the prevailing opinion of local professional journalists and editors is that the government representatives see media as one of the most important tools in a political fight which is an ethical and moral void. As a result, a belief crystallised that one of key problems is the absence of political will to apply applicable legal provisions, which may be best illustrated by the abuse of project co-financing at all levels of government, media outlets which operate without legal grounds for many years, or the state retaining its presence in the ownership structure of media.

Media Strategy has a chance to turn this trend in a favourable direction. The time will show whether there will be sincere political will for it or whether we will continue to witness two parallel realities: one that is provided for and advocated by this strategic document, or one which we witness every day when we see media content that is completely opposite to media freedoms for which we are striving in the 21st century.

2. Analysis of Media Strategy content

2.1 Goal and objectives

The goal defined in the Media Strategy is the following:

"Public information system improved through a harmonised positive legal framework which guarantees the freedom of expression, freedom of media, safety of journalists, media pluralism, developed media market, empowered journalist profession, educated citizenry, and institutions capable of implementing the legislation."

Accordingly, the objectives are the following:

1. Improved safety, socioeconomic, and professional environment for the work of journalists and other media professionals;
2. Established functional, sustainable, and fair media market, protected against political influence;
3. Functional, competent, professional, and open institutions with available mechanisms for protection against external pressure, which are consistently implementing public policies and regulations;
4. Sound, plural, and diverse media content satisfying the information needs of different social groups;
5. Enhanced professional knowledge and developed digital competences of individuals, institutions, media, journalists, and other media professionals

Being defined like this, the objectives demonstrate that Media Strategy had public interest as the starting point and that it strives to ensure that media scene responds to the needs and interest of the population and comply with ground rules in international legal documents relating to the freedom of information and free speech as the fundamentals of a democratic society.

The document rightly states that goal and objectives from previous Media Strategy were not adequately met, considering that the Action Plan for this Strategy proved not to be "an appropriate instrument for the achievement of those goals." Considering that the same position was taken by the Government of the Republic of Serbia, it is clear that the

government both understands how necessary it is to ensure that media policy is in conformity with the standards applicable in developed democracies, and is willing to implement it when drawing and adopting relevant pieces of legislation.

In a survey conducted for the requirements of this report, the representatives of both media associations and journalists' organisations confirmed that the situation changes as soon as adopted solutions are to be implemented. At the time of practical implementation of previous Media Strategy, the government did not display political will for consistent application of specified strategic commitments and this, among other things, caused the key problems that are today seen at Serbian media scene. The shortcomings revealed during the process of new Media Strategy development suggest that there is still a gap between what happens in real life, on one hand, and declared commitment and legislative solutions on the other hand. That is why we need to be aware of the danger that, when it comes to the implementation of strategic commitments and application of law, we have a repeat of the situation which was seen at Serbian media scene during the application period of previous Media Strategy. That's exactly why special focus should be placed on the consistent implementation of strategic commitments and the creation of legislative and other instruments that are needed for this important job.

2.2 Measures to achieve the goal and objectives, and key performance indicators for individual measures

Media Strategy describes in detail the measures which are supposed to **ensure better financial status of employees**, with a particular accent on collective agreements and union rights. This is a very important area and that is why it is critical that it is in full compliance with the Constitution, law, and good practice of developed democracies. It is necessary, however, to bear in mind that unfavourable financial position of persons employed in media sector does not predominantly arise from media owners' irresponsible and exploitative treatment of employees; rather, it results from the fact that market is distorted, there is unfair competition, and the state, through the money allocated from the national budget, still exerts massive influence on market relations which it abuses to influence media's editorial policy. That is why it is necessary to, in future implementation of strategic determinants relating to the improvement of the financial status of journalists and the

respect of union rights, bear in mind that it is not plausible without previous normalisation of relations on the market. This is a key presumption for regular and effective business and creation of a system which would prevent the state to, either directly or indirectly, influence the media market as much as it does at present. Until this changes, media outlets which enjoy close connection with the government and other centres of power will be in a better financial position and able to better meet the requirements with regard to union rights and similar.

In monitoring the implementation of this measure, it is necessary to:

- Take note of the reports and data of unions and other journalists' and media organisations involved in these matters, with a goal to keep track of the number of media which comply with the rules relating to the financial position of journalists (collective agreements, status of employees, etc.)
- Take note of other aspect of the status of employees, such as gender equality and other issues belonging to human rights
- Monitor the implementation of measures relating to the establishment of the precise number of people employed in media sector, based on the records kept by competent public authorities
- Follow activities relating to the establishment of the number of representative unions and journalists organised in unions

Journalists' safety is still seriously compromised but there have been some improvements in this regard. The Strategy supports the efforts to connect public authorities (prosecutors' office and police) with journalists' and media associations in order to create an effective system that would ensure fast response to threats. The work on this is well underway considering that earlier-established Standing Working Group for the Protection of Journalists consisting of the representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Prosecutors' Office, and journalists' and media organisations is already operating and generates results. That is why it is important that the strategic document is consistently applied in this segment and that support to joint efforts of the government and media and journalists' associations is ensured. Media Strategy expansively and thoroughly describes the measures which need to be introduced and the method of their practical implementation.

In monitoring this measure, it is necessary to:

- Follow the statistical data about threats, pressures, and attacks on journalists which are available to leading journalists' organisations
- Follow the activity of the Standing Working Group and the data on threats, attacks and pressures available to this Group
- Follow the activities of the public authorities (judicial system and police) which are processing the cases that were reported and the outcomes of the processes which were conducted

Protection of journalists' sources is one of the most important requirements for the creation of an environment conducive for professional and responsible work of journalists and media. In this regard there are serious divergence between the real life and that which is provided by law. For example, the authorities did not react to the case of the minister who publicly disclosed the, previously unpublished, correspondence between an editor and a politician. The cautioning by journalists' organisations that officials do not have the right of unauthorised access to journalists' communication provoked no reaction whatsoever, and the minister and other representatives of the government harshly criticised the media outlets which asked questions about this case. We mention this example here to further highlight how critical it is to consistently apply legislative and other solutions to which public authorities have strategically committed. We know from experience that not even widely aligned legislative solutions offer sufficient guarantee that these problems will be solved. That is why this should be paid careful attention in the coming phases of Media Strategy implementation.

In the implementation of this measure, it is necessary to:

- Follow the improvement of legislative framework, in accordance with the Action Plan for Media Strategy Implementation
- Follow the cases of violation of the right to source protection, as reported by journalists' and media associations

Measures to establish a functional, sustainable, and fair media market are defined well. Provisions relating to obligatory publication of data about the funds which are, on various

grounds, awarded to publishers are particularly important. Due to different obstructions, it has thus far been impossible to find these data systematised at a single place although changing this practice would make the business of media outlets and their relations with the government and different centres of power more transparent than now. This would much facilitate overseeing the spending of the money intended for maintenance and promotion of public interest as defined by law.

The Strategy recognises the importance of technological changes, particularly when it comes to media service providers, for the country's media scene, market relations, and protection of public interest. It also recognises how necessary it is that the public at large has access to different contents, as well as that the needs of different social groups are met in compliance with new technological functionality.

In the implementation of this measure, it is necessary to:

- Ensure that all measures and decisions are consistently implemented, and particularly focus on the implementation of measures and decisions which are directly connected with the meddling of the state and other (political or economic) centres of power in media market, and the possibility that they, individually or collectively, interfere with editorial policy.
- Follow the implementation of all individual measures under Media Strategy and Action Plan, particularly paying attention to the compliance with deadlines
- Regularly inform public about the implementation of adopted measures

Information, i.e. good-quality and versatile media content, are not sufficiently available to all strata of the population, and this should be particularly taken into account when implementing the solutions offered in this Strategy. Media market features inadequate representation of the needs and interests of different social groups and strata. These issues have been expounded in the domain of national minorities and other minority groups. Regrettably, and a general perspective is that there is much abuse in practice, these provisions are not given enough detail, which should not be an obstacle for their better practical elaboration in future amendments to the present legal framework.

Now we see that the distribution of media content is being, to a great extent, shifted into different new digital platforms. That is why this trend needs to be given more attention within the implementation of main directions set by the Media Strategy, with a goal to minimise different forms of manipulation to which the auditorium may be exposed.

In monitoring this measure, it is necessary to:

- Come up with new solutions which would be well suited to the technological advancement, i.e. the changes in ways in which content is distributed
- Ensure that new solutions are also available to citizens who do not have adequate technical training or equipment so as to avoid that the view on what is happening in the country is completely different for the citizens who use different digital platforms and those who rely only on TK channels available through providers.

Regulation and self-regulation play very important roles in the process of adjusting to new technologies. Although Media Strategy recognised this fact, the work on establishing the mechanisms which would empower (self)regulation is yet to come. Therefore, it will be a challenge to find a modality which would fine-tune the rules of journalists' profession, contained in the Code, so as to align them with future legal framework. This is about the need to, in accordance with legal and other frameworks, ensure that important self-regulation principles are incorporated into the legislation and to look for and strengthen the models which would provide that views and opinions of self-regulation bodies are taken into account when media related issues are discussed.

With regard to media service providers (MSPs), this matter was resolved by the establishment of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM). However, it is noticeable that new challenges are arising, considering that the distribution of content is shifted onto digital platforms which require new mechanisms and rules for public interest protection and promotion.

Measures relating to ensuring independent position of REM are a step forward compared with current situation. However, these measures *per se* cannot guarantee that huge influence of political and other centres of power on the work of this Body will be annulled or greatly diminished. None of the ruling structures established after the fall of Slobodan

Milošević's regime were willing to divest themselves of the opportunity to influence the editorial policy of leading TV stations. Considering that fact, it is good that new Media Strategy conveyed the intention to make things better. Consequently, it is necessary to create mechanisms which would enable this to happen in practice.

In the period before this Media Strategy was adopted, REM never showed readiness to be more active with regard to the promotion of public interest. They got around the publication of programme monitoring reports, refused to address the content of commercial broadcasters' information programmes, and ignored the initiatives to change their approach to above-mentioned issues. A negative example is the proposed Rulebook on how public services are to fulfil their obligations within the pre-election campaign. REM limited itself to public media services refusing a suggestion made by the Ministry of Culture and Information that the Rulebook should also cover private providers of media services. For the latter they subsequently adopted a Recommendation only. This area needs to be better regulated considering that private broadcasters enjoy a great number of viewers and have influential information programmes and, as a result, considerably influence citizens' political decisions during the pre-election campaign.

This negative trend was accompanied with the circumstances relating to free access to information of public importance. In the past period of several years the Republic of Serbia was regressing in this area considering that journalists have been complaining that sources, which should be completely open, are continuously getting more and more closed. Practical implementation of Media Strategy and new legislative solutions should turn round this trend, as well as other downward trends in related areas.

3. Analysis of Media Strategy implementation

Previous Media Strategy, for the period 2011 – 2016, was adopted at a session of the Government of the Republic of Serbia held by telephone on 28 September 2011. In the very end of this strategic document of thirty-three pages there was an Action Plan with the total

of thirteen points.¹ According to this Plan, then Ministry of Culture, Information and Information Society was supposed to be the main implementing party for all activities. It was only for two activities that involvement was expected from the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government, and the Privatisation Agency.

Valuable time was wasted during the first year after Media Strategy was adopted – partly due to the absence of political will during the mandate period of Minister Predrag Marković, and partly due to the electoral campaign. The results of then-held elections caused a tectonic political shift which, in the end of July 2012, brought Bratislav Petković to the head of the line Ministry. However, this shift did not echo in the strategic directions of the new Government which, through business continuity policy, accepted all the provisions of Media Strategy adopted by the previous Government. Regrettably, it did not prevent huge delay in the fulfilment of ambitiously set deadlines, the longest of which was limited to only two years.

Considerable acceleration in the realisation of the Action Plan ensued after the appointment of Minister Ivan Tasovac in September 2013. The set of media laws was finally adopted in August 2014, three years after the adoption of Media Strategy. Political will of the main actors which at first supported the implementation of new legal solutions was motivated by the opening of negotiations with the European Union. Maximal mobilisation of at-that-time human resources of the Ministry of Culture and Information, and coordination within the Government, produced visible steps forward in media sphere only when the implementation of the first Media Strategy was drawing near to its end.

All this was a great starting point for further enhancement in this area which was expected to ensue when new strategic document is developed and adopted. Unfortunately, due to numerous reasons which are all exhaustively described in the first chapter of this analysis, a new, second, Media Strategy was adopted with a delay of three years. Just this fact would be enough to, at the very start, put a question mark over the sustainability of the state's

¹ The text of Media Strategy for the period 2011 – 2016, in Serbian <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2011/75/1/reg>

strategic directions which will be hard or practically impossible to put into practice. Besides, accelerated technological progress which changes the media scene may lead to this document becoming obsolete in near future.

Unfortunately, already in the first weeks after Media Strategy was adopted (30 January 2020), there appeared difficulties which threaten to seriously undermine the plans and, accordingly, the practical implementation of proclaimed solutions and proposals from the five-year strategic document. The scheduling of national and local elections for 26 April seemed initially to be the potentially largest problem for the implementation of the Strategy. After the elections were postponed due to the fight against global pandemic, incomparably more important concerns became manifest and go a long way beyond the subject matter of this analysis.

Priority has shifted to the activities which relegated to secondary status the implementation process of the Action Plan which, according to what Prime Minister Ana Brnabić said, should be completed before 16 May of current year. At the time this analysis is written, nobody can say when the situation would be completely normal again and when usual processes and procedures which are prerequisite for strategic media plans development and implementation will be resumed. This should be added the pre-election campaign, holding the elections on a new date – 21 June 2020, installation of the new parliament, setting up the new Government, and appointment of future heads of the line Ministry of Culture and Information. All that was mentioned above will henceforth significantly affect the ambitious goals that have been awaiting their realisation ever since the Action Plan was adopted.

4. Analysis of Media Strategy implementation at the time of COVID-19 epidemic

It is clear that, after Media Strategy was adopted, there appeared some warning examples which confirm that present behaviour matrix is hard to change and that a lot of effort needs to be made to ensure that strategically proclaimed values bring true benefits. We will indicate positive examples as well as the cases which reveal that no document can ever foresee so exceptional set of circumstances such as this current coronavirus pandemic.

Declaration of the state of emergency brought expected restrictions which, accompanied with deteriorated business environment and financial problems, present a serious threat that their deferred negative effect will be felt in near future. This will be a new major challenge for the practical implementation of new Media Strategy whose text could certainly not anticipate all that, because of global epidemic, is now our reality and future.

No state of emergency should be a springboard for non-constitutional infringement of human rights; rather, it should be a short-term necessity to which one resorts due to ineffectiveness of daily procedures and normal mechanisms. In such circumstances, already reached media freedoms which Media Strategy should promote and further develop could easily be menaced.

It was therefore very surprising to hear Vladan Petrov, a judge in the Constitutional Court and a professor of constitutional law at the University in Belgrade's Faculty of Law, say, a day after the state of emergency was introduced in the Republic of Serbia (it was declared on 15 March 2020), in an interview for *Politika* daily that "some restrictions may be introduced to ensure that media do not publish unverified stories but only official communications, so as to avoid the situation where anybody can say anything about coronavirus and its spreading."² According to what is alleged in this text, the interviewee presumed that "measures can be introduced to ensure that media outlets provide only true and timely information to the public, and to prevent them from spreading untruths and lies."³ Only a day after this, a pro-government columnist of *Blic* daily Nebojša Krstić suggested, in his text entitled 'Disinfection and Pest Control' that "Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube should be cancelled in Serbia for the duration of the state of emergency."⁴

These views and opinions faced unanimous condemnation of professionals in the field and journalists' organisations. In connection with this, Aleksandar Gajović, State Secretary of the Ministry of Culture and Information, said that "no special Government's measures for media

² When to introduce the state of emergency and what does it mean, website of *Politika* daily : <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/450095/Kada-se-uvodi-vanredno-stanje-i-sta-ono-znaci#!> (accessed on 21 March 2020 at 16:00)

³ *Ibid*

⁴ "I recommend that Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are cancelled during the state of emergency": Nebojša Krstić about an idea for the "Disinfection and Pest Control" campaign, website of *Nedeljnik* daily: <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/predlazem-ukidanje-tvitera-fejsbuka-i-jutjuba-u-srbiji-za-vreme-vanrednog-stanja-nebojsa-krstic-o-ideji-za-akciju-dezinfekcija-i-deratizacija/> (accessed on 21 March 2020 at 16:30)

are foreseen for the duration of the state of emergency.”⁵ Further, above Ministry and the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media issued a declaratory appeal and warning in response to multitudes of tabloid disinformation in national media during the state of emergency.^{6 7}

Ombudsman Zoran Pašalić highlighted the dangers of the sensationalism in journalism, reminding that ombudsman’s office has already “warned that social media may be counterproductive in certain situations”⁸ and that “some countries have restricted the use of content on social media.”⁹ Unfortunately, this did not stop ‘infodemia’ – the term which reputable epidemiologist Zoran Radovanović used to describe the role of tabloids which “biologically harm readers since they disregard the facts and refer to false indications.”¹⁰

It was encouraging to hear the statement made by Milan Marinović, Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, who, in the first week of emergency situation already, said that the state of emergency “does not suspend the right of free access to information.”¹¹ Regrettably, details from medical records were published increasingly more often, because of which media and journalists’ organisations issued a joint statement condemning such occurrences and noting that they are in contravention with professional standards, Code of Serbian Journalists, Law on Personal Data Protection, Law on Patients’ Rights, and Law on Health Care.¹² This became such a common occurrence that, in the beginning of April, Commissioner Marinović reacted to the publication of the zero patient’s personal data in media saying that “personal data of persons infected by

⁵ Associations warn: the state should not introduce censorship during the state of emergency. Gajović: No special Government’s measures for media, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/udruzenja-upozoravaju-drzava-ne-sme-da-uvodi-cenzuru-tokom-vanrednog-stanja-gajovic-bez-posebnih-mera-vlade-za-medije/> (accessed on 21 March 2020 at 17:00)

⁶ <http://www.kultura.gov.rs/cyr/aktuelnosti/apel-sektora-za-informisanje-i-medije-povodom-izvestavanja-o-korona-virusu>

⁷ <http://www.rem.rs/sr/arhiva/vesti/2020/03/saopstenje-za-medije>

⁸ Ombudsman: Spreading of fake news and panic is counterproductive, website of *Blic* daily: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/ombudsman-sirenje-laznih-vesti-i-panike-kontraproaktivno/fxlzxd4> (accessed on 22 March 2020 at 17:00)

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ Radovanović: Tabloids are biologically harming readers by disregarding the facts and referring to false indications, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/etika/radovanovic-tabloidi-bioloski-ugrozavaju-citaoce-zbog-zanemarivanja-cinjenica-i-upucivanja-na-lazne-tragove/> (accessed on 21 March 2020 at 18:30)

¹¹ Commissioner: The estate of emergency does not suspend the right of free access to information, website of *Danas* daily: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/commissioner-u-vanrednom-stanju-nije-suspendovano-pravo-na-slobodan-pristup-informacijama/> (accessed on 22 March 2020 at 17:30)

¹² Journalists’ and media associations: Media should not publish data from medical records, website of NUNS: <http://www.nuns.rs/info/statements/47463/novinarska-i-medijka-udruzenja-mediji-da-ne-objavljuju-podatke-iz-zdravstvenih-kartona.html> (accessed on 27 March 2020 at 17:00)

coronavirus must not be made public.”¹³ His reaction was particularly provoked by TV Pink’s broadcast made at the Clinic for Infectious and Tropical Diseases in Belgrade in which most severe coronavirus patients were treated. This broadcast clearly showed, several times, a patient attached to devices and his name on the card hanging from his bed.¹⁴ Three days afterwards, the Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia issued a statement to call attention to the front page of *Večernje Novosti* daily which “stigmatised a patient in Novi Pazar and, by reporting about him, jeopardised his rights and the rights of his family members, who were also infected.”¹⁵

Introduction of curfew on 18 March 2020 and daily restriction of movement for the population rendered the work of media professionals even more complicated. The accreditation that started based on the lists of media outlets which also contained personal data of journalists - which were delivered to the Press Service of the Government of the Republic of Serbia - have initially caused discontent among attending journalists because of the “preference for certain media houses.”¹⁶ Soon afterwards, the RS Government’s Office for Cooperation with Media composed a communication about the places all over Serbia at which media professionals can obtain their accreditation so that they can be allowed free movement during the curfew.¹⁷ It is also praise-worthy that Serbian President and Prime Minister Offices helped *Danas*, *Vreme*, and other media houses by sending them hundreds of surgical masks to contribute to their safety when they work in the emergency situation.¹⁸

¹³ Commissioner: Personal data of persons infected by coronavirus must not be made public, website of *Insajder*: <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/17758/Commissioner-Podaci-o-li%C4%8Dnosti-zara%C5%BEenih-koronavirusom-ne-smeju-biti-javni.htm> (accessed on 07 April 2020 at 15:00)

¹⁴ Commissioner for *Insajder* about TV Pink’s broadcast from the Infectious Disease Clinic: It is not allowed to publish patients’ data or pictures, website of *Insajder*: <https://javniservis.net/mediji/portali/insajder/commissioner-za-insajder-o-reportazi-pink-a-iz-infektivne-nedozvoljeno-objavljivanje-podataka-i-slika-pacijenata/> (accessed on 07 April 2020 at 18:00)

¹⁵ NUNS: Many media outlets harshly infringe upon the rights of patients and the dignity of the deceased, website of N1: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a586618/NUNS-Brojni-mediji-grubo-krse-prava-bolelih-i-dostojanstvo-preminulih.html> (accessed on 10 April 2020 at 22:15)

¹⁶ Accreditations for work during curfew have been distributed, UNS was reported a case of the preferential treatment of certain media houses, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/UNS-news/95717/podeljene-akreditacije-za-rad-u-vreme-policijskog-sata-uns-u-prijavljen-slucaj-favorizovanja-redakcija.html> (accessed on 22 March 2020 at 18:30)

¹⁷ Notice about the places in which media professionals can obtain accreditation to enable them free movement during the curfew, website of NUNS: <http://www.nuns.rs/info/news/47416/obavestenje-o-mestima-za-preuzimanje-akreditacija-za-medijske-radnike-za-slobodno-kretanje-tokom-trajanja-policijskog-casa.htmlb> (accessed on 25 March 2020 at 10:30)

¹⁸ President’s Office and Prime Minister’s Office sent 500 surgical masks to *Danas*, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/scena/kabinet-predsednika-i-vlada-srbije-poslali-500-maski-redakciji-danasa/> (accessed on 25 March 2020 at 11:30)

Ten days after the state of emergency was declared, Suzana Vasiljević, Media Advisor to the President of the Republic of Serbia, said that “most media houses proved to be really good. The situation is much better than the situation at the time of flooding because journalists now verify the information they obtain. Regardless of the situation, most of them operate very well.”¹⁹ She added that “it was decided that general public should be informed about everything, that there will be no hiding of facts or numbers, considering that it is one of the ways to prevent further spreading of the epidemic.”²⁰

Only two days after this statement was made, on 28 March 2020, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted a Conclusion about information during pandemic which provided for the centralisation of public information about coronavirus pandemic during the state of emergency. This Decision outlined that general public shall be provided pandemic-related information exclusively by Prime Minister Ana Brnabić or a person duly authorised by the Crisis Response Team.²¹ This rigid and unnecessary decision was met by undivided criticism from local and international experts in the field.²² Harlem Désir, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and Andrea Orizio, Head of OSCE Mission to Serbia, stated, in this organisation’s communication, that “journalists and media outlets are entirely devoid of opportunity to obtain pandemic information from sources other than those mentioned in this decision.”²³ This led to prompt withdrawal of above Conclusion, which, as Prime Minister Brnabić explained, took place because President of the Republic of Serbia asked for its withdrawal, and the President later stated that the Information Decree was a mistake.²⁴ Serbian Prime Minister said on that occasion that she “does not want to

¹⁹ Decision on locking down three towns may follow within 24 hours: Vasiljević about the criticizing of the Fairground and “Corona in the Government”, website of *Telegraf*:

<https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/3170317-odluka-o-zatvaranju-3-grad-a-mozda-u-naredna-24-sata-vasiljevic-o-kritikama-sajma-i-koroni-u-vladi> (accessed on 26 March 2020 at 11:15)

²⁰ *Ibid*

²¹ The Government prohibited any statements about coronavirus, the information is to be provided exclusively by the Crisis Response Team, website of N1: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a584226/Vlada-zabranila-izjave-o-koronavirusu.html> (accessed on 4 April 2020 at 17:00)

²² Experts in the field warn: Centralising of information is a violation of the Constitution and law, website of N1: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a584488/Struka-upozorava-Centralizovanje-informisanja-je-krsenje-Ustava-i-zakona.html> (accessed on 4 April 2020 at 17:15)

²³ After a journalist was apprehended and then released, Serbian Government is withdrawing its conclusion on media reporting, website of *Slobodna Evropa*: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vlada-srbija-hapsenje-novinarka-ana-lalic-brnabic-nova/30525262.html> (accessed on 4 May 2020 at 18:00)

²⁴ Brnabić: Serbian Government will withdraw its decision on information since it was asked to do so by the President, website of N1: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a584636/Brnabic-Vlada-Srbije-povlaci-odluku-o-informisanju.html> (accessed on 4 April 2020 at 17:30)

give Harlem Désir and EU representative Tanja Fajon a reason to go around saying that there is no media freedom in Serbia.”²⁵ Withdrawal of this legal document was saluted by OSCE.²⁶ Nevertheless, the fact remains that this attempt to control media is deemed to be a bad move of the Serbian Government in the period after Media Strategy was adopted.

This was followed by a scandalous affair with Ana Lalić, Nova S portal journalist who wrote about the situation in the Clinical Centre of Vojvodina, being apprehended, searched her home, and later released from detention.²⁷ It took only a few hours for numerous representatives of the state apparatus to mobilise in an attempt to deny the information about the sad state of affairs in hospitals during coronavirus pandemic. This behaviour of government representatives attracted international attention and provoked the reaction of a number of different institutions. We also heard from Prime Minister Brnabić and President Vučić who said that “it was a mistake to keep the journalist in detention.”²⁸ All this yet again put a question mark over the honest will of the state to implement in practice the Media Strategy principles which, inter alia, provide for the reporting in public interest. In the end of April, general public was informed that Chief Public Prosecutors’ Office in Novi Sad had rejected the criminal charges made against Ana Lalić. Criminal charges were made for the criminal offence of causing panic and disorder as referred to in Art. 343 of the Criminal Code.²⁹

Regrettably, this case was continued through *Kurir* tabloid’s daily campaigning and the politicians’ using trash-talk on N1 TV and leaders of this media house. NUNS stated that this campaign is “an orchestrated battle of pro-government media against professional

²⁵ After a journalist was apprehended and then released, Serbian Government is withdrawing its conclusion on media reporting, website of *Slobodna Evropa*: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vlada-srbija-hapsenje-novinarka-ana-lalic-brnabic-nova/30525262.html> (acceded on 4 May 2020 at 18:00)

²⁶ OSCE saluted the decision of the Government of Serbia to withdraw its conclusion on information, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/96445/oeps-pozdravio-odluku-vlade-srbije-da-povuce-zakljucak-o-informisanju.html> (acceded on 4 April 2020 at 17:45)

²⁷ Journalist Ana Lalić to be held in detention for 48 hours, website of Nova S: <https://nova.rs/drustvo/novinarki-ani-lalic-odredeno-zadrzavanje-od-48-sati/> (acceded on 4 April 2020 at 18:00)

²⁸ Vučić: Information Decree was a mistake, as was the detention of the journalist, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/96693/vucic-uredba-o-informisanju-bila-greska-kao-i-drzanje-novinarke-u-pritvoru.html> (acceded on 10 April 2020 at 20:45)

²⁹ Criminal charges against journalist Ana Lalić rejected, website of *Danas*: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/odbacena-krivicna-prijava-protiv-novinarke-ane-lalic/> (acceded on 5 May 2020 at 13:00)

journalists and media outlets who are operating in public interest.”³⁰ NUNS also noted that “this tabloid is one of the champions when it comes to the violation of the Journalists’ Code, law, and basic decency. Namely, according to the Press Council, the number of texts violating the Code that *Kurir* editors published in the second half of 2019 is 1,106 (six offences a day, on average), and, according to a research made by KRIK, the number of false or unfounded allegations published on the front pages of *Kurir*, in the course of last year only, is 142.”³¹

The first meeting of the Parliament that was held during the state of emergency was marked, among other things, by the statements made by Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and by Aleksandar Marković, MP from SNS. In her address, Prime Minister said that the opposition had said “all sorts of stuff” about tabloid media but that it still does not dare mention the ‘tycoon media’, and added that it is common knowledge how much money they have and ‘what they would not hesitate to do’.”³² She went on to say that “one should look at the things these ‘tycoon media’ [which she failed to name] wrote during this state of emergency and mentioned the example of article about the Clinical Centre of Vojvodina (KCV).”³³ MP Aleksandar Marković attacked, during the parliamentary discussion, a number of media outlets and journalists because of “their relentless campaigning, during the state of emergency, against Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić ‘using everything they have, regardless of the price, and at any place whatsoever’.”³⁴ Near to the very end of the state of emergency, Suzana Vasiljević, Serbian President’s Advisor for Information, appeared in media and stated that President Aleksandar Vučić, his Office, and his Press Service “have never categorised media houses as pro-establishment or tycoon ones, anti-government or

³⁰ NUNS: Dangerous pro-government media’s campaign against professional journalists and media, website of NUNS: <http://www.nuns.rs/info/statements/47691/nuns-opasna-kampanja-provladinih-glasila-protiv-profesionalnih-novinara-i-medija.html> (accessed on 10 April 2020. u 21:30)

³¹ *Ibid*

³² Brnabić: Opposition dare not talk about ‘tycoon media’, website of NUNS: <http://www.nuns.rs/info/news/48051/brnabic-opozicija-ne-sme-da-prica-o-tajkunskim-medijima.html> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 19:00)

³³ *Ibid*

³⁴ A new attack on media in Serbian Parliament, *Cenzolovka* under fire because of the *Reporters Without Borders*’ report, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/u-skupstini-srbije-novi-napad-na-medije-cenzolovka-na-tapetu-zbog-izvestaja-reportera-bez-granica-video/> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 19:30)

pro-government ones.”³⁵ She added that media situation in Serbia is not ‘fabulous’, but that “it is fabulous nowhere in the world.”³⁶ Her opinion is that “our problem here is that our media scene is divided into those who are pro-government and those who are against the government, and in this war waged by opposition media outlets against the government, or by pro-government media outlets against the opposition, it is medical doctors who found themselves under attack although they have nothing to do with any of it. Some media outlets were campaigning against medical doctors and came to media conferences only to ask political questions.”³⁷

Because of the prohibition of free movement during the curfew, popular TV programme *Utisak nedelje* was forced to twice change the time it is shown on Nova S cable channel.³⁸ Regrettably, the rule concerning the restriction of movement was not consistently complied with by pro-government TV stations which, regardless of the curfew, hosted the representatives of ruling coalition who were not directly involved in the fight against pandemic. The presence of double standards in the treatment of different media became clearly visible in Niš where information about the infected could be heard and seen “nowhere except on RTS (a public media service) and Pink.”³⁹ This was the reason why journalist from several media outlets in that region (*Južne vesti*, *Večernje novosti*, *Danas*, N1, *Beta* news agency, and *Al Jazeera*) appealed to Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Prime Minister Ana Brnabić requesting that information should not be hidden. They asked Vučić and Brnabić to “force the services to do their job and duly inform the population.”⁴⁰

³⁵ Vasiljević: We are not dividing media outlets into pro-regime and tycoon ones, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/98241/vasiljevic-ne-delimo-medije-na-prorezimske-ili-tajkunske.html> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 19:30)

³⁶ *Ibid*

³⁷ *Ibid*

³⁸ *Utisak nedelje* live starting at 2 p.m. due to the curfew, website of N 1: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a579981/Utisak-nedelje-uzivo-od-14-casova-zbog-policijskog-casa.html> (accessed on 22 March 2020 at 18:45)

³⁹ Withholding of information about coronavirus spread panic in Niš: in the end, about the infected only on *Pink* and *RTS*, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/uskracivanje-informacija-o-koronavirusu-prosirilo-paniku-u-nisu-o-zarazenima-na-kraju-samo-na-pinku-i-rts-u/> (accessed on 22 March 2020 at 19:00)

⁴⁰ Journalists appealing to the national President and Prime Minister not to hide the number of infected in Niš, website of *Južne vesti*: <https://www.juznevesti.com/Drushtvo/Apel-novinara-predsedniku-drzave-i-premierki-da-se-informacije-o-broju-oboelih-u-Nisu-ne-kriju.sr.html> (accessed on 23 March 2020 at 10:30)

As alleged by media outlets, access to information from the Clinical Centre in Kragujevac was allowed only to Radio-televizija Kragujevac.”⁴¹ Because of the impeded communication with competent bodies in above-mentioned medical institution, the representatives of local media outlets and correspondents wrote to the leadership of this medical institution an open letter which was signed by the representatives of Kragujevac *Glas Šumadije* portal, *Pressek*, *Info KG*, *Ritam grada*, *Fonet* and *Beta* news agencies, N1 TV station, *Danas* daily, etc.⁴²

On 20 March, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić exited a press conference incensed after her verbal conflict with controversial journalist Stefan Cvetković, and a day after this the journalist of research portal CINS was not allowed access to the regular press conference in Belgrade.⁴³ ⁴⁴ The need to reduce the number of persons present at ‘medical’ press conferences contributed to Serbian Government deciding that, starting from 27 March, above conferences are to be transmitted exclusively by RTS and that their TV signal is to be transmitted by interested TV stations whose journalists were still allowed to attend daily media briefings.⁴⁵

Two weeks later, on 10 April, the Government of Serbia informed the general public that, beginning with Saturday, 11 April, journalists’ questions at press conferences about the coronavirus situation in Serbia would be sent by mail and that “all efforts will be made that all questions that have timely arrived are answered at the conferences.”⁴⁶ The Government’s communication stated that this was done due to “journalists, cameramen and photo-reporters being increasingly more concerned about their health, and following

⁴¹ Seven people receiving treatment in KC Kragujevac, two persons on ventilators, website of *Šumadija press*: <http://www.glassumadije.rs/sedmor-na-lecenju-u-kc-kragujevac-dvoje-na-respiratorima/> (accessed on 22 March 2020 at 19:15)

⁴² Kragujevac journalists requested, in an open letter, information from the Clinical Centre, website of N1: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a581218/Kragujevacki-novinari-u-otvorenom-pismu-traze-od-Klinickog-centra-informacije.html> (accessed on 24 March 2020 at 08:00)

⁴³ Tumultuous conference: Ana Brnabić quarrelled with a journalist, website of *Alternativna televizija*: <https://www.atvbl.com/vijesti/srbija/burno-na-konferenciji-ana-brnabic-se-posvadjala-sa-novinarom-20-3-2020> (accessed on 22 March 2020 at 19:30)

⁴⁴ Corona as an excuse for media discrimination – the case of CINS, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/korona-kao-izgovor-za-diskriminaciju-medija-slucaj-cins/> (accessed on 22 March 2020 at 19:45)

⁴⁵ Medical press conferences will be transmitted by RTS, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/95952/lekarske-konferencije-za-novinare-prenosice-rts.html> (accessed on 26 March 2020 at 23:45)

⁴⁶ Conferences on coronavirus: journalists will send their questions for medical experts by mail, website of *Politika*: <https://beta.rs/vesti/politika-vesti-srbija/125715-konferencije-o-korona-virusu-novinari-ce-pitanja-za-strucnjake-slati-mejlom> (accessed on 10 April 2020 at 20:30)

the objections with regard to the presence of risk at press conferences held by the President and members of the Government, as well as medical experts."⁴⁷ *Radio-televizija Srbije* and News Agency *Tanjug* continued their live broadcasts of conferences.

This decision, made in the beginning in until-then longest curfew lasting sixty hours in total, understandably baffled journalists and media, as well as public at large. "The point of this decision was that the authorities realised that citizens who do not have access to independent media have, watching press conferences of the Crisis Response Team, started to understand the difference between the questions asked by pro-government media and those asked by independent media, and to notice who is promoting public interest and who the interest of their political party", tweeted Yugoslav Ćosić, director N1 TV.⁴⁸ Journalists' association of Serbia invited Serbian Government to reconsider their decision that journalists can no longer be present at the conferences in which medical doctors and officials answer their questions. This Association noted that "it is of critical importance to enable journalists to pose their questions and follow-up questions directly to medical experts and ensure that general public is provided the information they would otherwise not be able to obtain."⁴⁹ Independent Society of Vojvodina Journalists, Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia, Media Association, Online Media Association, *Lokal pres* Association of Local Independent Media, and Association of Independent Electronic Media acted in concert. Their opinion was that "there is no reason whatsoever for the Government to, at the time when leading epidemiologists are saying that pivotal and precarious days await the citizens of Serbia, restrict direct questions for the experts."⁵⁰ Their conclusion was that, by taking this action, the Government of Serbia "incurs damage to public information". Consequently, they demanded that the practice of shrinking media and journalists' freedoms stops immediately.⁵¹ This decision of the Government of Serbia was also met with

⁴⁷ *Ibid*

⁴⁸ https://twitter.com/JugoslavCosicN1/status/1248657240153821185?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw (acceded on 11 April 2020 at 11.45)

⁴⁹ UNS invites the Government to reconsider their decision to keep away the journalists, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/saopstenja/96901/uns-poziva-vladu-da-preispita-odluku-o-udaljavanju-novinara.html>

(acceded on 11 April 2020 at 11:30)

⁵⁰ The Government of Serbia should allow live airing of the Crisis Response Team's media conferences, website of NUNS: <http://www.nuns.rs/info/statements/47725/vlada-srbije-da-omoguci-pracenje-konferencija-za-medije-kriznog-staba-i-uzivo.html> (acceded on 11 April 2020 at 13:00)

⁵¹ *Ibid*

negative comments from the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) which stated that “Serbia introduced bad practice of holding press conferences during coronavirus pandemic which are not attended by journalists who have to send their questions beforehand.”⁵² Dubitable concept of press conferences organised in this manner, and unclear selection criteria for the questions sent, contributed to the situation where first *Fonet* agency, and then also *Danas*, *Vreme*, and *Insajder*, ceased to send questions to the Crisis Response Team. Instead of serving the purpose of informing a wide auditorium, subsequent restoration of the former format of press conference was abused by the representatives of the conflicting media which denounced and trash-talked each other ‘live’ on TV.

In the prevailingly unfavourable atmosphere, the declaration of the state of emergency was accompanied with some positive examples in media sphere. Public media services deserve high praise for reacting promptly and, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development, preparing, with the teaching staff of elementary and secondary schools, the recordings of school lessons for pupils who ceased to go to school after the state of emergency was declared. These lessons were at first broadcast, at a fixed time, only at *Radio-televizija Srbije’s* third channel and *RTS Planeta* platform. In the second week of the state of emergency, the province public media service became involved, too. *Radio-televizija Vojvodine* started to, at its second channel, broadcast school lessons in the languages of national minorities: in Hungarian, Slovakian, Romanian, Rusinian, and Croatian. With the financial support of the Province Government, it was extended to include programmes for digital preparations for elementary school final exam in the languages of national minorities.⁵³ In the meantime, RTS additionally extended its programme offer by broadcasting recorded lessons for secondary schools, while the range of school subjects was primary school was widened. Later on, pre-school programme was also introduced and the second channel was used more often. Public media services were joined by numerous regional television stations which broadcasted educational programme in eight languages of national minorities.

⁵² EFJ: Serbian bad practice with journalists not attending press conferences, website of N1: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a589804/EFJ-Losa-praksa-Srbije-da-novinari-ne-prisustvuju-konferencijama.html> (accessed on 08. 05. 2020. u 20:00)

⁵³ The Province Government allocated 16 million dinars for digital preparations for elementary school final exams in the languages of national minorities, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/96821/pokrajinska-vlada-izdvojila-16-miliona-dinara-za-digitalnu-pripremu-za-malu-maturu-na-jezicima-nacionalnih-manjina.html> (accessed on 11 April 2020 at 12:00)

The changes of programme schemes to accommodate 'distance learning' contributed that United group's Total TV include *RTS Treći kanal* in its offer. As a consequence of limited technical capacity, Studio B was excluded from the offer. According to what is stated in SBB company's communication, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development did not respond positively to their offer to, free of charge, "enable that school children have a further option of following the school programme within the video club at EON and D3 digital platforms. This would give the pupils a possibility to watch all lessons when they wish, i.e. a possibility to watch lessons several times, or make pauses so as to more precise notes, if necessary."⁵⁴

The publication of a useful and practical "Journalists' Guide for Public Health Issues" by the Independent Society of Vojvodina Journalists (NDNV) was considered to be a positive step in those circumstances. International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), which represents the interest of 600,000 journalists from 146 countries all over the world, has also issued recommendations for journalists and media professionals with regard to reporting during coronavirus pandemic.

CINS research network continued their investigative journalism by collecting data about the number of ventilators and analysing the state of affairs in medical institutions of Serbia during the state of emergency – which was a topic which justifiably stirred huge interest of general public.

In the period of the state of emergency, the importance of media pluralism, freedom of thought and accessibility of relevant information are all understandably emphasised. Besides the undoubtedly greatest impact of the public media service, information cable channels, web portals, new agencies, digital platforms and social media also gained importance during this current crisis. It is noticeable that print media are losing this race due to the accessibility of information via new technologies, movement restrictions, and impeded distribution and sale of papers.

A research which *Ipsos* agency made during the state of emergency showed that, at daily level, "average TV viewing time in Serbia increased by as many as two hours compared with

⁵⁴ SBB offers additional assistance to pupils who are now involved in online school, website of N1: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a587208/SBB-nudi-dodatnu-pomoc-ucenicima-Sarcevic-i-Brnabic-jos-uvek-bez-odgovora.html> (accessed on 11 April 2020 at 12:30)

the previous period; the fact that contributed to this is that members of different generations spent time in front of a TV screen – whether because they had more free time or because of their school duties (distance learning).”⁵⁵ As for the frequency of information about COVID-19 provided in Serbian programmes, “public service RTS 1 is first-ranked (32 percent of viewers most often watch RTS1), followed by TV *Pink* (23) and TV *Prva* (17), while cable N1 accounted for nine percent of the most-frequent viewers.”⁵⁶

The state of emergency caused most media outlets to reorganise their operation mode. In the new circumstances, many media professionals began to work from home on daily basis. *Novi magazin* weekly announced, in its 19 March issue, that they may suspend their print editions for the duration of the state of emergency and curfew. This was carried out with regard to their subsequent issues which appeared online. *Kragujevačke novine*, the only print media in Kragujevac (which, because of financial difficulties, has been appearing only twice a week ever since the New Year’s Day) informed the public on 25 March that this paper will not appear at the points of sale during the state of emergency that was declared due to coronavirus epidemic.⁵⁷ These examples reveal that problems and crisis escalated and that they will be further aggravated due to the reduced consumption, practically non-existent budgets for marketing, and significantly lower income from the points of sale. All this will adversely affect the already faltering local market. There is no doubt that global pandemic will indirectly affect present social and union rights - which are discussed in a part of Media Strategy - and that they will need to be paid more attention in the implementation of strategic commitments.

Analysing the period between the adoption of Media Strategy on 30 January and the declaration of the state of emergency in the Republic of Serbia on 15 March 2020, it is important to highlight several benchmarks which are critically important for understanding this short period of Media Strategy implementation and subsequent drawing of conclusions based on this analysis. We will here categorise them in several thematic and logic units

⁵⁵ Ipsos: Population in the region spent two hours more than earlier in front of a TV, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/96740/ipsos-gradjani-u-regionu-uz-tv-dva-sata-duze-nego-ranije.html> (accessed on 10 April 2020 at 22:30)

⁵⁶ *Ibid*

⁵⁷ *Kragujevačke novine* will not be published during the state of emergency, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/trziste/kragujevacke-novine-nece-izlaziti-dok-traje-vanredno-stanje/> (accessed on 25 March 2020 at 11:00)

according to the way in which they were tackled in the above-mentioned strategic document.

Abuse in the project co-financing process became commonplace and a routine occurrence in the above mentioned forty-five-day period when it picked up the pace, presumably because of national and local elections. The process of setting-up the committees encountered problems at all levels of government. After the protests by representative journalists' organisations and media associations, the Ministry of Culture and Information have somewhat revised the decision about the members of committees.⁵⁸ At an expert meeting in the residence of the Norwegian Ambassador on 9 March, Prime Minister Brnabić said that she felt personally dissatisfied with what had happened in connection with this call at national level.

The absence of any accountability regarding the setting-up of committees at local level, in the period following the adoption of Media Strategy, is best depicted in a research of Serbian Journalists' Association according to which "out of 117 calls for media project co-financing at local level in 2020, the websites of the local self-governments concerned published 67 decisions on the appointment of project evaluation committees in which most members, 38 of them, were appointed upon the proposal of ComNet Association of Electronic Media. Besides ComNet "project co-financing in these local self-governments, for which the total of approx. 1.3 billion dinars were allocated, was evaluated by 29 representatives of the Professional Association of Journalists of Serbia (PROUNS). The representatives of *Nova mreža Srbije* (NMS) was third-ranked this year when it comes to the representation in evaluation committees."⁵⁹

According to UNS findings, "the representatives of organisations which make up the Coalition of journalists' and media associations (UNS, Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia, Independent Association of Vojvodina Journalists, and *Lokal pres*) were appointed in only nine LGUs this year. Last year, Coalition representatives were present in 86

⁵⁸ Ministry of Culture annulled eight decisions and set up new evaluation committees, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/UNS-news/94689/ministarstvo-kulture-ponistilo-osam-resenja-i-formiralo-nove-konkursne-komisije.html> (accessed on 24 March 2020 at 9:30)

⁵⁹ *KomNet*, *PROUNS* and *Nova mreža Srbije* are most represented in evaluation committees, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/UNS-news/95093/komnet-prouns-i-nova-mreza-srbije-najzastupljeniji-u-konkursnim-komisijama.html> (accessed on 24 March 2020 at 10:45)

evaluation committees.”⁶⁰ According to this research, “besides the representatives of above mentioned associations, some members of this year’s committees were nominated by the Journalists’ Association of Vojvodina, Journalists’ Association of Niš, RAB Srbija, Association of Electronic Media of Vojvodina, Journalists’ Club of Pomoravlje, or independent media experts.”⁶¹

Moreover, abuse happened in the allocation of funds in Vojvodina LGUs where media companies were awarded after the public call was made.⁶² In this year’s calls for media content co-financing, pro-regime media which violate the Code of Serbian Journalists on daily basis were again awarded while professional media were again deprived of support.⁶³ Pančevo example is among the most drastic ones. There the funds were awarded to media outlets which violate law and the Code, such as *Srpski Telegraf*, *Informer*, and RTV Pančevo.⁶⁴ The south of Serbia also saw some legal abuse with regard to setting up this year’s committees. It was in Niš where the representatives of representative associations decided on media projects.⁶⁵ Their questionable decisions on the disbursement of approx. 84 million dinars from the budget had been published immediately before the state of emergency was abolished.⁶⁶

Regulatory Body for Electronic Media was for several reasons in focus in this period. Since Serbian Parliament elected three lacking members of REM, this Body became fully staffed in

⁶⁰ *Ibid*

⁶¹ *Ibid*

⁶² A star is born: a company that was founded after the call for media was made is awarded millions in Vojvodina, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/zvezda-je-rodjena-firma-osnovana-posle-raspisivanja-medijskih-konkursa-dobija-milione-u-vojvodini/> (accessed on 24 March 2020 at 10:00)

⁶³ More about this: Distribution of political prey to local media: money goes to pro-regime media outlets, rather than to professional ones, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/97964/politicka-podela-plena-lokalnim-medijima-novac-dobijaju-rezimski-a-ne-profesionalni-mediji.html> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 20:00)

⁶⁴ Pančevo is again awarding the pro-government media which are violating the Code and law: Money for *Informer*, *Srpski telegraf* and RTV Pančevo, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/pancevo-opet-nagradjuje-provladine-medije-koji-krse-kodeks-i-zakone-novac-i-za-informer-srpski-telegraf-i-rtv-pancevo/> (accessed on 24 March 2020 at 10:15)

⁶⁵ NUNS and UNS: Representatives of non-representative associations decide on media projects in Niš, website of NUNS: <http://www.nuns.rs/info/news/47093/nuns-i-uns-predstavnici-nereprezentativnih-udruzenja-odluuju-o-medijskim-projektima-u-nisu.html> (accessed on 24 March 2020 at 10:30)

⁶⁶ More about this: Niš residents’ money again awarded to SNS affiliated and leaning media, for *Kurir* and the wife of not-meant-to-be Bulatović PR, website of *Južne vesti*: <https://www.juznevesti.com/Drushtvo/Novac-Nisljia-opet-za-medije-bliske-i-naklonjene-SNS-za-Kurir-i-suprugu-nesudjenog-Bulatovicevog-PR-a.sr.html> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 19:45)

accordance with “3+2” formula after the relevant agreement reached in multiparty dialogue with the intermediation of the European Parliament. In this way, the vacancies were filled up first by Judita Popović (from the competent parliamentary committee), Zoran Simjanović (from the Association of Film, Scene, and Drama Artists, and the Association of Composers), and Aleksandar Vitković (from the coordination body of national councils of national minorities).

In the middle of February, REM Council was completed by two new members. Slobodan Cvejić was elected from among the ranks of candidates nominated by the competent committee of the Parliament of AP Vojvodina, and Višnja Arandžević was elected from among the ranks of candidates whose nomination is agreed between association of electronic media publishers and Serbian journalists’ associations.⁶⁷ Those two replaced two former members: Đorđe Vozarević (who had been nominated by the Parliament of AP Vojvodina) and Goran Peković (nominated by RAB of Serbia) who withdrew their membership in the REM Council.

REM was given central stage because of its adoption of controversial “Rulebook on fulfilment of public media services’ obligations within the pre-election campaign” despite the fact that the line Ministry of Culture and Information had given negative opinion on the proposed text of this document.⁶⁸ This simulation of control between the Ministry of Culture and Information and REM was seen but has never attracted so much attention from the public, partly due to the fact that, after REM would provide a negative opinion, different compositions of ministries did not bother to further contest the proposed document. So, REM was not prevented from putting those documents in practice. In the beginning of March, a disputable “Recommendation to commercial service-providers on how to ensure that registered political parties, coalitions, and candidates are all duly represented without discrimination in the pre-election campaign” was adopted.”⁶⁹ Immediately before the state of emergency was declared and the scheduled elections postponed, REM website published

⁶⁷ Cvejić and Arandžević are new members of REM, website of Cenzolovka: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/cvejic-i-arandjelovic-novi-clanovi-rem-a/> (accessed on 24 March 2020 at 10:45)

⁶⁸ New REM Rulebook: How to create more confusion during the pre-election campaign, website of Cenzolovka: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/novi-pravilnik-rem-a-stvaranje-dodatne-konfuzije-tokom-predizborne-kampanje/> (accessed on 24 March 2020 at 11:00)

⁶⁹ REM did not provide for an environment conducive for fair media reporting in pre-election campaign, website of Cenzolovka: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/rem-nije-stvorio-uslove-za-fer-izvestavanje-medija-tokom-predizborne-kampanje/> (accessed on 24 March 2020 at 11:15)

its first overview of the reports on the oversight of media service providers during the pre-election campaign, for the period 4–8 March 2020.⁷⁰ In the meantime, REM also adopted a new report on the oversight of media service providers for the period 4-15 March (second overview) which is available at the website of this Regulator.

On 23 March REM published on their website the information that “during the state of emergency, they will process only urgent matters which need to be decided promptly. Urgent matter shall be deemed to include the implementation of any decision made by a public authority with regard to the suppression of epidemic.”⁷¹ Despite this official information, on its session on 27 March, the Council of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media discussed the request of “Adria Media Group d.o.o. Beograd – Kurir televizija” to be issued license for the provision of media services.⁷² Even though this decision has not been published on REM website, it was confirmed for *Cenzolovka* website by the PR manager of AMG Irena Petrović who clarified that “REM license was obtained for cable broadcast and that the commencement date of programme broadcast has not been set yet.”⁷³ Information that this license was provided gave rise to questions about the origin of financial resources with which Adria media group was purchased by its new owner Igor Žeželj, about which *Cenzolovka* website wrote in detail on 17 April, during the period of the state of emergency.⁷⁴

The Council of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media should be commended for deciding to allow that media services providers (MSPs) postpone their payment of monthly liabilities for the period March – May 2020, due to the state of emergency caused by coronavirus, under the condition they submit a relevant request. According to the information obtained

⁷⁰ REM: Electoral List ‘Aleksandar Vučić – For Our Children’ most represented in the pre-election programme, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/rem-lista-aleksandar-vucic-za-nasu-decunajzastupljenija-u-predizbornom-programu/> (accessed on 24 March 2020 at 11:30)

⁷¹ Information about REM operation during the period of the state of emergency, website of REM: <http://www.rem.rs/sr-lat/arhiva/vesti/2020/03/obavestjenje-o-radu-rem-tokom-trajanja-vanrednog-stanja> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 17:30)

⁷² 375th extraordinary session, website of REM: <http://rem.rs/sr/arhiva/sednice/2020/03/375-vanredna-sednica> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 16:30)

⁷³ *Kurir TV* provided broadcast license by REM, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/trziste/kurir-tv-dobio-od-rem-a-dozvolu-za-emitovanje/> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 17:00)

⁷⁴ More about this: Who gave 10 million euro to Igor Žeželj before he purchased Kurir, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/trziste/ko-je-igoru-zezelju-dao-10-miliona-evra-pre-kupovine-kurira/> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 19:00)

by the Association of Serbian Journalists, when deciding to allow the broadcasters to postpone the payment of their monthly liabilities, REM Council took into account that, with the declaration of the state of emergency, private companies, as well media service providers, faced the “problems regarding profitability and survival, as well settlement of their liabilities, including those towards the Regulator.”⁷⁵ *Emisiona tehnika* Public Company followed the example of REM and allowed “interested users who provide media services (TV and radio broadcasters) to postpone payment of monthly fee for the services which JP ETV provided based on the contracts concluded in the period March – May 2020, without accruing the default interest.”⁷⁶

On 27 April, non-governmental organisation “Association for the Protection of Constitutionality and Legality” submitted a petition for the prohibition of reality shows during the state of emergency that was signed by 62,000 people. Also, the Serbian Parliament’s Committee for Culture sent to the Government, seeking their opinion, a proposal of the law on the suppression of reality shows, which was supported by 42,852 people.

The state of emergency delayed the scheduled session of the Appellate Court in the case of the murder of Slavko Ćuruvija.⁷⁷ In the meantime, attention of general public was drawn to the information that the prosecutors’ office has filed an appeal against the first-instance conviction, which will be the focus of second-instance proceedings.⁷⁸

In the beginning of March, the Anti-Corruption Council of the Government of the Republic of Serbia demanded that the Prime Minister submits all “contracts that the state-owned Telekom Srbija company concluded with the participants on media market, as well as other

⁷⁵ REM deferred fee payment liability for broadcasters; the ruling party most represented at *Pink TV* and least at *N1 TV*, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/UNS-news/95833/rem-odlozio-placanje-naknada-emitirima-vladajuca-stranka-najzastupljenija-na-pinku-a-najmanje-na-n1.html> (accessed on 25 March 2020 at 09:00)

⁷⁶ ETV: Deferral of fee payment liability for TV and radio broadcasters, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/95935/etv-odlaganje-placanja-naknade-za-tv-i-radio-emitere.html> (accessed on 26 March 2020 at 23:30)

⁷⁷ Postponed session of Appellate Court in the case of the murder of Slavko Ćuruvija, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/odlozena-sednica-apelacionog-suda-u-slucaju-ubistva-slavka-curuvije/> (accessed on 4 April 2020 at 18:15)

⁷⁸ Matić: It would be dangerous to return the trial for the murder of Ćuruvija to the beginning, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/matic-bilo-bi-opasno-vratiti-sudjenje-za-ubistvo-curuvije-na-pocetak/> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 16:00)

evidence, for the purposes of determining whether Telekom's decisions and business are in accordance with Serbian Constitution which guarantees accessibility, integrity, and equality of market conditions for all participants on the market."⁷⁹

United medija's charges against *Informer* daily because of a text published on 23 March 2020 which "deceived parents and children about this Company's programmes" were filed during the state of emergency."⁸⁰ A group of fifteen individuals from the academic and cultural scenes filed charges against the main and responsible editor of *Informer* daily Dragan J. Vučićević because of his causing panic by transmitting fake news and his unsubstantiated reporting that "corona kills like plague", as published in that daily, along with the alarming headline "A Catastrophe of Biblical Proportions."⁸¹

On 10 April general public was informed that SNS commissioner for Šabac Boban Birmančević had submitted two criminal charges – against *Podrinske novine* and against journalist Hanibal Kovač because their spreading of fake news and causing panic.⁸²

Media campaign against the author of "Vladalac" ("The Ruler") series shown on N1 TV was also implemented in the period after Media Strategy was adopted. Pink TV and *Informer* were most active participants of this campaign. Tabloid *Informer* wondrously revealed banking data about monetary transactions on the account of JSP production house whose representatives said that they will start court action because of these attacks.⁸³ In the beginning of April, this pro-government tabloid described editor Jugoslav Ćosić and journalist Žaklina Tatalović as "enemies of all medical doctors in Serbia only because the above mentioned N1 TV journalist asked several questions at the Crisis Response Team's

⁷⁹ Anti-Corruption Council of the Government asked for all media contracts concluded by Telekom, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/savet-za-borbu-protiv-korupcije-od-vlade-trazi-sve-medijske-ugovore-telekoma/> (accessed on 24 March 2020 at 11:45)

⁸⁰ United Group starts court action against *Informer* because their deceiving of citizens, website of N1: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a581053/Tuzba-protiv-Informera-zbog-obmanjivanja-gradjana-o-programima-United-Grupe.html> (accessed on 24 March 2020 at 12:00)

⁸¹ A group of individuals filed charges against *Informer* editor for spreading panic by fake news, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/96413/grupa-pojedina-podnela-tuzbu-protiv-urednika-informera-zbog-sirenja-panike-laznim-vestima.html> (accessed on 4 April 2020 at 16:30)

⁸² Šabac SNS filed criminal charges against *Podrinske novine*, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/sabacki-sns-podneo-krivicnu-prijavu-protiv-podrinskih-novina/> (accessed on 10 April 2020 at 20:00)

⁸³ Vučić announces, *Informer* publishes: Denial and question about how come the tabloid is in possession of banking data, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/vucic-najavi-informer-objavi-demanti-i-pitanje-otkud-tabloidu-bankarski-podaci/> (accessed on 25 March 2020 at 12:00)

press conference.”⁸⁴ *Informer’s* owner and main editor Dragan J. Vučićević tweeted photographs and disparaging comments about journalist Žaklina Tatalović from N1 TV. N1 TV made a statement in which it demanded that government reacts to these sexist attacks.⁸⁵ These tweets were condemned for being offensive and sexist by journalists’ associations and the Equality Commissioner Brankica Janković who had reacted to similar sexist attacks in April, too.^{86 87}

Tabloid attacks and ‘information leak’ took an even more radical form in the case of *Nedeljnik* magazine. According to Veljko Lalić, its main and responsible editor, present Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin had access to Lalić’s correspondence via electronic mail with former defence Minister Dragan Šutanovac. This happened – and it never happened before - but there was no reaction from the prosecutors’ office; also, the reaction of other media was noticeably muffled, and the reaction of journalists’ associations was lifeless.⁸⁸ Because of it, Journalists’ Association of Serbia organised a round table on the interception of journalists’ and editors’ communication.⁸⁹

Ozon press www.ozonpress.net portal’s identity copying by www.ozonpress.rs portal closely affiliated with current Government is an innovative way of domain abusing and misleading the readers in the period after Media Strategy was adopted. This case was given even more

⁸⁴ NUNS: Freedom of expression, safety of journalists, and information flow are seriously threatened, website of NUNS: <http://www.nuns.rs/info/statements/47600/nuns-ozbiljno-ugrozena-sloboda-izrazavanja-bezbednost-novinara-i-protok-informacija.html> (accessed on 4 April 2020 at 15:45)

⁸⁵ More about this: N1 demands that government reacts to sexist attacks on N1 journalist, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/desk/vesti-iz-medija/97760/n1-trazi-reakciju-drzave-na-seksisticke-napade-na-novinarku.html> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 20:30)

⁸⁶ Commissionaire: *Informer’s* editor tweets about journalist Tatalović are impermissible sexism, court action needs to be started, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/desk/vesti-iz-medija/97741/poverenica-tvitovi-urednika-informera-o-novinarki-tatalovic-nedopustiv-seksizam-podneti-prituzbu.html> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 20:15)

⁸⁷ Janković: Impermissible attacks on women journalists and woman doctor Kisić Tepavčević, website of N1: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/jankovic-nedopustivi-napadi-na-novinarke-i-doktoru-kisic-tepavcevic-video/> (accessed on 07 April 2020 at 15:15)

⁸⁸ Lalić: It is clear that journalists’ communication is being intercepted. They should be looking into this, rather than pretending they do not care, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/lalic-jasno-je-da-se-novinari-prisluškuju-treba-da-se-zainteresuju-a-ne-da-se-prave-da-ih-je-bas-briga/> (accessed on 25 March 2020 at 13:00)

⁸⁹ It is not only “*Nedeljnik*” that has been overseen; journalist discovered when and how they have been intercepted, website of *Cenzolovka*: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/95134/nije-samo-nedeljnik-pracen-novinari-otkrili-kada-su-i-kako-prisluškivani.html> (accessed on 25 March 2020 at 13:15)

weight by the interpretation that “Info 24 Media” company which is awarded funds under calls for project co-financing is behind the disputable domain.⁹⁰

In the beginning of April, Twitter company published an interesting data that they “identified clusters of accounts engaged in inauthentic coordinated activity which led to the removal of 8,558 accounts working to promote Serbia’s ruling party and its leader.”⁹¹ In its statement, this company stressed that “the alleged government-backed bot campaign violated Twitter’s policy and was a “targeted attempt to undermine the public conversation”⁹² The author of this research, in his interview for the Voice of America (VOA) highlighted that a vast majority of cancelled accounts were opened in two large waves – in the middle of 2018, before the protests entitled “1 of the 5 million” started, and the other wave followed in the middle of 2019.”⁹³

On 3 March the Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia made known that “since the beginning of 2000, their database has recorded the total of 16 events in which journalists were attacked or pressurised.”⁹⁴ Inviting government authorities to take action as provided by law, this Association particularly emphasised the following three events which all took place on the same day: “In Leskovac, journalist of *Jug media* portal Dragan Marinković was physically attacked while reporting from the secondary school students’ protests because of alleged holding of the Pride Parade in that city, and *Jug press* journalist Ljiljana Stojanović received foul insults and threats at that same event. In front of the Special Court in Belgrade, *Danas* journalist Jelena Diković was followed and intimidated by an unknown person who had formerly attempted to obstruct her interviewing people after the main court hearing for Štrpce crime. Journalists Slaviša Lekić and Nedim Sejdinović were targeted by right-wing portals for the millionth time. Namely, *Prismotra* portal accused these former

⁹⁰ SNS media outlet copied the identity of Čačak’s *Ozon press* portal, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/naprednjacki-medij-kopirao-identitet-cacanskog-portala-ozon-press/>

(acceded on 25 March 2020 at 13:30)

⁹¹ Twitter removed more than 8.5 thousand fake accounts which promoted Vučić and SNS, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/scena/tviter-izbrisao-vise-od-8-i-po-hiljada-bot-naloga-koji-su-promovisali-vucica-i-sns/>(acceded on 4 April 2020 at 16:45)

⁹² *Ibid*

⁹³ Author of Stanford analysis: Some of removed accounts belonged to SNS officials, website of *Cenzolovka*: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a586416/Autor-analize-Stanford-univerziteta-o-ugasenim-Tviter-nalozima.html> (acceded on 10 April 2020. u 20:15)

⁹⁴ NUNS: New attacks on journalists, website of NUNS: <http://www.nuns.rs/info/statements/47048/nuns-novi-napadi-na-novinare.html> (acceded on 25 March 2020 at 13:45)

presidents of NUNS and NDNV that they are rallying against Serbia and Serbian people and that they are separatists and auto-chauvinists.”⁹⁵

According to the Independent Association of Vojvodina Journalists’ statement of 10 March, “on a website that has already attacked our journalists and associates in the past, NDNV Executive Director Veljko Milić was described as “devil’s advocate“ who is filing charges against “patriots“ and who is active in NDNV which is a “separatist organisation.”⁹⁶ This Association has similarly reacted to the attacks on N1 journalists after Media Strategy was adopted.⁹⁷

The Journalists’ Association of Serbia called upon the police to “investigate the threats which the editor of *GM info* and a member of UNS Steering Board Violeta Popović received on Tuesday, 17 March, when an unknown man approached her, without any reason whatsoever, in a shop in Gornji Milanovac, and in a menacing tone told her that “she better mind her own business“, instructing her what topics the Gornji Milanovac portal she is editing should address.”⁹⁸

This incident happened on 26 March in Zrenjanin where a two-member local KTV team got arrested in the municipality building.⁹⁹ Local prosecutors’ office issued a statement that these two people were arrested because they refused to apply mandatory disinfection measures when entering the Zrenjanin municipality building. They were ordered 48-hour detention from which they were released to defend themselves while out of custody.¹⁰⁰ KTV journalists, however, claim that the reason for government reaction was that they were

⁹⁵ *Ibid*

⁹⁶ NDNV: NDNV associates under a new wave of threats, government tolerates violence, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/ndnv-saradnici-ndnv-a-izlozeni-novom-talasu-pretnji-drzava-tolerise-nasilje/> (accessed on 25 March 2020 at 14:00)

⁹⁷ NDNV: N1 journalist exposed to Goebbels-like attacks; Unacceptable silence of the government, website of NDNV: <http://www.ndnv.org/2020/02/22/ndnv-novinarke-n1-izlozene-qebelsovskim-napadima-nedozvoljivo-cutanje-drzave/> (accessed on 25 March 2020 at 14:15)

⁹⁸ UNS: police must investigate the threats made to the editor of *GM info*, website of UNS: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/uns-policija-da-istrazi-pretnje-urednici-gm-infa/> (accessed on 25 March 2020 at 14:30)

⁹⁹ Prosecutors’ office: Apprehended because they refused disinfection measures; mother of the arrested person: Attempt of pressurising because of the reporting by TV station which I own, website of *Insajder*: <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/17552/Tu%C5%BEila%C5%A1tvo-Privedeni-zbog-odbijanja-dezinfekcije;-majka-uhap%C5%A1enog-Pritisak-zbog-izve%C5%A1tavanja-televizije-%C4%8Dija-sam-vlasnica.htm> (accessed on 27 March 2020 at 10:30)

¹⁰⁰ UNS: Prosecutor in Zrenjanin should abandon prosecuting the KTV team, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/saopstenja/96033/uns-tuzilac-u-zrenjaninu-da-odustane-od-gonjenja-ekipe-ktv.html> (accessed on 28 March 2020 at 13:00)

going to ask questions about the city-owned land being put on auction at the time of the state of emergency. This incident provoked reaction of domestic organisations which demanded that the prosecutor withdraws the indictment, as well as from international ones, such as from “Reporters Without Borders”, whose message was that “at the time of coronavirus, Serbian authorities are supposed to support journalists, not to harass them.”¹⁰¹ Until the time this paper is written, KTV Zrenjanin have not been returned camera and mobile telephone which they were seized but which they need in their everyday activities.¹⁰²

This list of events should be added an event from the end of March when the enforcement officer Goran Veselinović attacked Nova.rs portal’s cameraman who was at this place of work carrying out his work duties.¹⁰³

On 2 April, during his appearance on *Pink TV*, the leader of the Serbian Radical Party Vojislav Šešelj threatened Snežana Čongradin, journalist of *Danas* daily with arrest. This was a continuation of his threats to this journalist he made during a parliamentary debate in the middle of 2019.¹⁰⁴

Because of the death threats mailed to it, on 9 April *Direktno.rs* portal addressed the public in an open letter addressed to the President Aleksandar Vučić and the Prime Minister Ana Brnabić.¹⁰⁵

The threat trend continued when *Prismotra.net* portal, a member of the ‘phantom’ portals and Facebook pages whose creators are hard to trace, accused the Novi Sad School of

¹⁰¹ Reporters Without Borders: At the time of coronavirus, Serbian authorities are supposed to support journalists, not to harass them, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/96017/reporteri-bez-granica-vlasti-u-srbiji-u-vreme-koronavirusa-treba-da-podrzavaju-novinare-a-ne-da-ih-maltretiraju.html> (accessed on 28 March 2020 at 13:15)

¹⁰² KTV camera and phone still under arrest, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/96195/kamera-i-telefon-ktv-televizije-i-dalje-uhapseni.html> (accessed on 4 April 2020 at 15:30)

¹⁰³ Public enforcement officer attacked Nova.rs portal’s cameraman, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/javni-izvrsitelj-napao-snimatelja-portala-nova-rs/> (accessed on 29 March 2020 at 10:15)

¹⁰⁴ Šešelj again issuing threats to journalist Snežana Čongradin, website of NUNS: <http://www.nuns.rs/info/news/47586/seselj-opet-preti-novinarki-snezani-congradin.html> (accessed on 4 April 2020 at 16:00)

¹⁰⁵ A letter from *Direktno.rs* editorial staff to Vučić and Brnabić: You will be guilty if anything happens to us!, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/pismo-redakcije-direktno-rs-vucicu-i-brnabicki-vi-cete-biti-krivi-ako-nam-se-nesto-desi/> (accessed on 10 April 2020 at 19:30)

Journalism that it trains “journalists who are separatists and foreign agents.”¹⁰⁶ Above-mentioned portals’ sole activity is to slander the individuals and organisations which they believe not to be pro-government, such as this School.

Srpski telegraf tabloid transmitted the statement made by singer Aca Lukas in which he threatened the authors of two popular TV shows, Zoran Kesić and Ivan Ivanović, saying that “he will throw them from the 10th floor if anything happens to his mother”. Harlem Désir, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, expressed his concern over these threats directed to the authors and hosts of "24 minuta" and "Veče sa Ivanom Ivanovićem" TV shows. Désir tweeted that “it raises concern that these threats are published in national media and invited competent bodies to investigate this case and to protect journalists against, as he called it, unacceptable intimidation.”¹⁰⁷

In the beginning of March, American NGO Freedom House published their annual report in which Serbia “was ranked in the group of countries with the sharpest fall in freedom since 2010.”¹⁰⁸ Only a couple of days after, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić stated that “media situation in Serbia is now better than it was in 2011.”¹⁰⁹

A similar discordance – this time between President Vučić and the Reporters Without Borders – accompanied the publication of the latter’s latest annual list on 21 April. According to the latest list of this French NGO, Serbia fell by further three places so that it is now ranked 93rd.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ The ‘phantom’ portal accused the Novi Sad School of Journalism that it trains “journalists separatists and foreign agents”, website of *Cenzolovka*: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/96826/fantomski-portal-optuzio-novosadsku-novinarsku-skolu-da-obucava-novinare-separatiste-i-strane-agente.html> (accessed on 10 April 2020. u 19:45)

¹⁰⁷ OSCE representative condemned threats made to Kesić and Ivanović, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/97451/predstavnik-oeps-a-osudio-pretnje-kesicu-i-ivanovicu.html> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 20:00)

¹⁰⁸ Freedom House: Serbia in the group of countries with the greatest fall of freedoms since 2010, website of N1: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a574720/Fridom-Haus-Srbija-u-grupi-zemalja-sa-najvecim-padom-sloboda-od-2010.html>

¹⁰⁹ Brnabić: Media situation better than it was in 2011, website of *Danas*: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/brnabic-situacija-u-medijima-bolja-nego-2011/> (accessed on 25 March 2020 at 14:45)

¹¹⁰ Serbia fell on the Reports Without Borders’ ranking list, website of N1: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a591299/Srbija-pala-na-rang-listi-Reportera-bez-granica.html> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 18:00)

Only a few days later, within the celebration of the World Press Freedom Day on 3 May, which was for the first time ever marked in the state of emergency, the Platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists published its annual report. This report stated that “the number of attacks on media, including death threats to journalists, was on the rise in Serbia in 2019.”¹¹¹ As of 31 December, Serbia had 21 active alerts at this Platform, with six new cases having been reported in 2019 and the government having responded to four.

Hardly anything would better than these polarised assessments, statements, and reports illustrate the actual state of affairs as it was at the time of writing this analysis which covers the period before coronavirus epidemic and the period of the state of emergency and curfew. The only logical conclusion is that the adoption of the Action Plan and formal commencement of Media Strategy implementation will definitely have to wait for some better times.

5. Conclusion

The very fact that most of above chapters were written during the state of emergency is greatly reflected in the conclusions that were drawn. Distinction between the period before and the period after the state of emergency is most visible in the chapters which analyse the implementation of Media Strategy until now. The commencement of its implementation should have happened in drastically different circumstances in which the development of Action Plan would have been the priority. Taking all that into consideration, it is clear that the real analysis will have to wait until the state of emergency is abolished and normal life is restored, so that bases can be put in place for practical realisation of ambitious plans which are already seriously delayed. In brief, we are looking at a repeat of the scenario from the beginning of implementation of previous Media Strategy, but the reasons for delay now and then are different.

¹¹¹ Council of Europe: The number of attacks and threats to journalist is growing in Serbia, website of Cenzolovka: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/savet-evrope-u-srbiji-raste-broj-napada-i-pretnji-novinarima/> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 18:30)

In the unpredictable circumstances in which the discourses, values, and standards on which modern civilisation rests are being changed, it is not realistic to expect that freedom of expression and media freedom could be of primary concern for the great world powers and influential governmental and non-governmental organisations. That is the context in which the position of Serbia and all that happened in it between 15 March and 16 May 2020, the period of the state of emergency, should be realistically studied. Media Strategy cannot be immune to this – not with regard to what it demands, nor with regard to the values it advocates.

It is these values precisely that are to be put to a hard test by the present situation. They will be degenerated, conserved, or improved, depending on how the situation further develops. There is a danger that the global health whirlwind turns into an anti-democratic whirlpool and economic vortex which will ravage and sweep many things on this country's media scene which is being analysed here.

Some of the concerns and problems were already pointed out in the present analysis, except they should definitely not be allowed to grow into trends. These primarily include the deterioration of freedoms, as warned by Tanja Fajon, member of the European Parliament, who said that “coronavirus cannot be an excuse to confine democracy.”¹¹² She was motivated to say this by the matters of concern which also provoked a reaction of Harlem Désir, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media who reminded OSCE Participating States that “any emergency responses to the coronavirus must be proportionate, necessary and non-discriminatory.”¹¹³ In this context, a study of the French NGO “Reporters Without Borders” with its conclusion that “If the Chinese press were free, the coronavirus might not be a pandemic”¹¹⁴ has an alerting and sobering effect.

Above reactions contribute to the efforts which have thus far thwarted some of the attempts to restrict the freedom of expression in Serbia during the state of emergency.

¹¹² Fajon: coronavirus cannot be an excuse confine democracy, website of N1:

<http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a582065/Fajon-Koronavirus-nije-izgovor-za-zakljucavanje-demokratije.html>

(acceded on 27 March 2020 at 18:00)

¹¹³ OSCE: Coronavirus response bill should not impede the work of the media in Hungary, website of UNS:

<http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/95815/oebs-madjarski-zakon-o-suzbijanju-korona-virusa-ne-sme-da-ometa-rad-medija.html> (acceded on 27 March 2020 at 19:00)

¹¹⁴ Reporters Without Borders: If the Chinese press were free, the coronavirus might not be a pandemic, website of NUNS: <http://www.nuns.rs/info/news/47439/reporteri-bez-granica-da-su-kineski-mediji-slobodni-rizik-od-pandemije-bio-novi-tredbi-mnogo-manji.html> (acceded on 27 March 2020 at 19:15)

Regrettably, this did not put a stop to media abuse which cash in on the massive interest of the public. This kind of abuse is promoted by individual pro-government media which “are uncontrollably bombarding readers with horrifying front pages, contrived news, and medical advice given by incompetent people.”¹¹⁵ Although it is clear that there are no predetermined protocols for this kind of global pandemic, they must not be a setting for media experiments of any kind.

The Government’s measures to counter COVID-19 were prevalingly modelled after the Chinese experience. These models are, among other things, tailored to the public information system in that country and does not correspond with Serbian legal framework, existing freedoms, and common journalistic practice. Negative examples which we saw can be described as intentional manipulation, discrimination, some of them as mismanagement, involuntary mistakes, the consequences of inexperience, tension, or fatigue. What they all have in common, however, is that they all took place at the time of the state of emergency which Media Strategy, as it is to be expected, did not entirely anticipate and did not provide the mechanisms which prevent such media policies in communication with interested public.

Contrary to above mentioned negative phenomena (in their research, *Građanske inicijative* noted down 42 cases when the freedom of expression was infringed during in the state of emergency),¹¹⁶ the behaviour of public media services was commendable. Namely, the latter adjusted their programme schemes to emergency situation and offered their numerous platforms as a basis for elementary and secondary distance education, which essentially fulfilled a public interest which is of particular importance at the time when educational facilities are closed. A precondition for such position of public media services is a well-defined model for public media service financing. The improvement of this model is also addressed by Media Strategy which provides a number of measures meant to strengthen the editorial independence of *Radio-televizija Srbije* and *Radio-televizija Vojvodine*.

¹¹⁵ Government do not see what pro-government media outlets are doing, website of *Danas*: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/vlast-ne-vidi-sta-rade-provladini-mediji/> (acceded on 28 March 2020 at 09:00)

¹¹⁶ *Građanske inicijative*: During the state of emergency 42 cases of the violation of the freedom of expression, website of N1: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a595409/Gradjanske-inicijative-U-vanrednom-stanju-42-slucaja-krsenja-slobode-izrazavanja.html> (acceded on 5 May 2020 at 21:15)

The failings brought by the crisis are becoming more and more visible in media sphere, particularly at the local level.¹¹⁷ Advertising income continuously decrease or is completely missing and, due to the state of emergency and restricted physical movement of media audience, the sale of print media has sunk. Some media outlets has, in this circumstances, shifted to online editions completely, most of them have swiftly reduced the number of pages, and a number of them offered an option of delivering papers to reader's home address for free.¹¹⁸ In these new circumstances, many employees will find it hard to keep a job in media industry. That is why it is not surprising that "Nezavisnost" - the Culture, Art and Media Union, appealed to all media houses in Serbia "not to let go of their part-time reporters during the state of emergency, and to facilitate their working from home to the greatest extent possible, as well as to provide them with necessary PPE."¹¹⁹

The Journalists' Association of Serbia has publicly forwarded a proposal to the Government of Serbia in which they asked for support to print and local media which, in their opinion, are at the highest risk at the moment. This Association called upon the Ministry of Culture and Information to soonest possible complete the call for project co-financing and distribute the allocated budget funds.¹²⁰ LGUs which have completed their project co-financing calls were called upon to immediately disburse money to media outlets.

Very revealing is data provided by UNS that, out of 123 municipalities which have thus far published their calls, as many as a half did not publish decisions on disbursement of money to media outlets, while Novi Sad, Medveđa, Sokobanja, and Despotovac have suspended their calls. That is why UNS appealed that "in the municipalities and towns in which

¹¹⁷ More about this: A disaster: that is how journalists of local media outlets describe financial situation at the time of corona, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/katastrofa-tako-novinari-lokalnih-medija-opisuju-finansijsku-situaciju-u-vreme-korone/> (acceded on 5 May 2020 at 21:00)

¹¹⁸ *Danas* daily at your home address without delivery costs, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/scena/list-danas-na-kucnoj-adresi-bez-troskova-dostave/> (acceded on 28 March 2020 at 14:00)

¹¹⁹ Nezavisnost Union: Appeal to media houses not to let go their part-time reporters, website of *Cenzolovka*: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/sindikata-nezavisnost-apel-medijskim-kucama-da-ne-otpustaju-honorarne-saradnike/> (acceded on 28 March 2020 at 14:15)

¹²⁰ UNS: Serbian Government should introduce measures to ensure financial survival of media outlets, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/saopstenja/95774/uns-vlada-srbije-da-usvoji-mere-za-finansijski-opstanak-medija.html> (acceded on 28 March 2020 at 14:45)

evaluation committees did not meet, distance meeting of these bodies be organised.”¹²¹ To this date, this appeal was responded to by the Municipality of Kruševac which, as a result, became first LGU in which the evaluation committee members evaluated public information projects while resorting to the distance meeting option due to emergency situation.¹²² In the meantime, the Municipality of Trstenik announced that the evaluation committee for media projects will hold distance meetings during the state of emergency.”¹²³

The proposals for the Government of the Republic of Serbia were all joined together at a single place by the Online Media Association, Media Association, Association of Independent Electronic Media, *Lokal pres* - Association of Local Independent Media, Independent Journalists Association of Serbia, Independent Association of Vojvodina Journalists, and “Nezavisnost” – Trade Union Organisation for Culture, Arts, and Media Sector.¹²⁴ These are the proposals of measures “to alleviate the adverse impact of the state of emergency on the economic survival of media and protect journalists’ and media professionals’ rights arising from employment, so as to ensure free flow of information and full and timely public information.”¹²⁵ Even though they were intended for the Government, these proposals produced a reaction of the President of Serbia who, when speaking about economic measures in the end of March, said that “the government will make all efforts to ensure that life is easier for media outlets, particularly smaller ones which are suffering most in this situation.”¹²⁶ This is the context to be taken into account when interpreting the letter which the Ministry of Culture and Information forwarded to the Ministry of Finance to demand that the latter Ministry approves the disbursement of funds to the media outlets

¹²¹ UNS: LGUs should financially support media outlets, Ministry of Culture should complete the calls, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/saopstenja/95929/uns-lokalne-samouprave-finansijski-da-podrze-medije-ministarstvo-kulture-da-okonca-konkurse.html> (accessed on 28 March 2020 u 15:00)

¹²² Good practice: In Kruševac, due to coronavirus, committee for evaluation of media projects held a distance meeting, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/UNS-news/96660/dobra-praksa-u-krusevcu-zbog-virusa-korona-komisija-za-medijske-projekte-radila-na-daljini-.html> (accessed on 07 April 2020 at 17:30)

¹²³ In Trstenik, too, media projects evaluation committee will have distance meetings, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/UNS-news/96862/i-u-trsteniku-komisija-za-medijske-projekte-radice-na-daljini-.html> (accessed on 10 April 2020 at 19:00)

¹²⁴ Media Coalition forwarded to the Government their proposals of measures to help media outlets, website of NUNS: <http://www.nuns.rs/info/statements/47471/medijska-koalicija-uputila-vladi-predloge-mera-za-pomoc-medijima.html> (accessed on 30 March 2020 at 20:30)

¹²⁵ Proposals for the RS Government, website of NUNS: <http://www.nuns.rs/info/statements/47474/predlozi-za-vladu-rs.html> (accessed on 30 March 2020 at 20:45)

¹²⁶ Vučić announced financial support for media, due to pandemic, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/UNS-news/96112/vucic-najavio-finansijsku-podrsku-medijima-zbog-pandemije.html> (accessed on 30 March 2020 at 20:45)

which have been awarded funds under the calls for media project co-financing.¹²⁷ In this regard, the State Secretary Aleksandar Gajović expressed his personal opinion that “Serbian media will not survive without the help from the government, regardless of the fact that some people think otherwise.”¹²⁸ In the end of April, the Ministry of Finance approved the signing of project co-financing contracts at national level.¹²⁹

With regard to media association’s demanding prompt disbursement of funds under the calls which were already completed and publication of new calls, former president of NUNS and former member of the Working Group for the development of present Media Strategy Vukašin Obradović tweeted the following: “Wonderful, let’s feed Vučić’s propaganda machinery.”¹³⁰ He added that “it is not help to ‘media outlets’ that we need, because pro-government, propaganda services will be the only ones to have benefit.”¹³¹ According to Obradović “what we need is a fund to help the development of media pluralism – that is the only chance for those few professional media outlets to survive.”¹³² There are, then, drastically different views and opinions about the measures which should be introduced during the coming recession.

IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said that “It is now clear that we have entered a recession as bad or worse than the 2008-2009 global financial crisis.”¹³³ Bearing in mind that Serbian media scene still did not recover from the previous crisis, it is clear that the priority in the coming period will be to prevent new, devastating effects of a similar catastrophe, caused by pandemic. That is why it is good to keep in mind the example of Austria which

¹²⁷ Ministry of Culture and Information demands that the Ministry of Finance approves disbursement of funds to media outlets, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/UNS-news/96117/ministarstvo-kulture-i-informisanja-trazi-od-ministarstva-finansija-odobrenje-za-isplatu-novca-medijima.html> (accessed on 30 March 2020 at 21:00)

¹²⁸ Gajović: Serbian media will not survive without help from the government, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/96186/gajovic-mediji-u-srbiji-nece-preziveti-bez-pomoci-drzave.html> (accessed on 4 April 2020 at 15:30)

¹²⁹ Ministry of Culture and Information confirmed the text written by UNS: The approval for disbursement of project money to media is here, website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/UNS-news/97943/ministarstvo-kulture-i-informisanja-potvrdilo-pisanje-UNS-stigla-saglasnost-za-isplatu-novca-medijima-za-projekte.html> (accessed on 5 May 2020 at 20:45)

¹³⁰ Vukašin Obradović’s Twitter account: https://twitter.com/V_Obradovic/status/1244279523421704192?s=03 (accessed on 30 March 2020 at 20:00)

¹³¹ Vukašin Obradović’s Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/download?s=13> (accessed on 30 March 2020 at 20:15)

¹³² *Ibid*

¹³³ IMF Managing Director: We have entered a recession similar to one in 2008, website of N1: <http://rs.n1info.com/Biznis/a582827/MMF-Recesija-zbog-koronavirusa-ista-onoj-iz-2008.html> (accessed on 28 March 2020 at 15:15)

earmarked fifteen million euro to help media outlets suffering “coronacrisis” which will be distributed among their daily newspapers and privately-owned radio-TV stations which were most affected.¹³⁴

All that was noted as a problem before 15 March when the state of emergency was introduced, should remain the priority focus. Symbolically, redirecting all present EU funds to help suppress pandemic should not be accompanied with redirecting the present focus from media but quite to the contrary – even greater interest should be expressed for the reform process in this turbulent sphere. That is why it is of critical importance that the representatives of government comply with their own legislation and that journalists comply with their applicable Code. That is how public interest will be promoted, i.e. right to objective, true, and timely information, which has always been the best way to protect journalists’ profession.

Although no final conclusions can be drawn only based on above negative examples illustrating the absence of media legislation and strategy implementation during a period of several weeks, they nevertheless clearly expose the abuse which no amendment to the existing legislation can prevent if truthful political will to stave it off is missing. Rushed and ill-thought-out decisions of the highest representatives of government, the abuse by government authorities and judiciary, accompanied with the pro-government media outlets’ attacks, all these is signalling that the freedom of expression is violated increasingly more often, that journalists’ safety is threatened and that the flow of true and timely information is impeded. All mentioned here is justified using expressions such as “causing anxiety among general population” which is only a pretext for the restriction of media freedoms.

This proves how right were those who perceived the seemingly cathartic self-critical analysis of previous Media Strategy implementation in current Government’s strategic document as a relief valve for the dissatisfaction of media community and the creation of an illusion that, in future, things will essentially change for the better. Above-mentioned self-criticism of the government needs to survive the impending challenges without providing reasons for justified criticism by the representatives of OSCE-a, European Union, Council of Europe, and

¹³⁴ Austrian Government allocated 15 million euro for coronavirus-affected media; website of UNS: <http://www.uns.org.rs/sr/desk/vesti-iz-medija/96588/austrijska-vlada-za-medije-pogodjene-koronakrizom-daje-15-milijuna-eura.html> (accessed on 07 April 2020 at 15:30)

other non-governmental organisations. Only an approach like that would guarantee successful implementation of key commitments under Media Strategy, which is expected to be beneficial for 2,556 media houses and 327 other media formats which are currently entered in the Media Register of the Business Register Agency.

6. Monitoring the Media Strategy implementation based on the Action Plan

Practical implementation of Media Strategy will be based on adopted action plans. Media Strategy provides that first action plan is to be for the period 2020 – 2022, and second action plan for the period 2023 - 2025. A precondition for the implementation of second action plan is the evaluation of the fulfilment of the previously applicable one.

The Ministry of Culture and Information is responsible for monitoring the implementation of goals and measures foreseen in the Media Strategy and Action Plans for its implementation. To make the monitoring more efficient, the above Ministry will create a database of performance indicators.

Responsibility for the implementation of measures and activities foreseen in the Action Plan and Media Strategy lies with line ministries and public authorities which are put in charge of specific measures and activities.

In the end of third calendar year after the adoption date, the Ministry of Culture and Information will prepare a progress report on the implementation of Media Strategy.

Effects of Media Strategy implementation will be measured through two evaluation processes. First evaluation will take place in the end of the implementation period of the first Action Plan and will serve as a foundation for the development and adoption of the second action plan. An independent evaluation will follow after the implementation of Media Strategy is completed.

The Ministry of Culture and Information will prepare the final report on the results of Media Strategy implementation.

This analysis will in future follow the implementation of measures and the key performance indicators within the goal and objectives defined by Media Strategy-based action plans.

Particularly, focus will be placed on monitoring the following objectives:

1. Improved safety, socio-economic and professional environment for the work of journalists and media professionals
2. Established functional, sustainable, and fair media market, protected against political interference
3. Functional, competent, professional, and open institutions have available mechanisms for protection against external pressure; also, public policies and regulations are consistently applied
4. Respectable, plural, and versatile media contents meet the information requirements of different social groups
5. Improved professional knowledge and developed digital competences of citizens, institutions, media, journalists and media professionals in media environment

The implementation of defined measures, activities, and indicators will be monitored within each of the objectives listed above. This will help us create a clear picture for each objective and, consequently, facilitate the drawing of conclusions about the effectiveness of Media Strategy implementation, the implementability of action plans and specific changes that are relevant for the sector of interest for Media Strategy for period 2020 - 2025.