

Shadow Report

# State of democracy in Serbia 2018



EU-RS THINK TANK



Shadow Report

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**State of democracy in Serbia 2018**

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# Introduction

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The state of democracy is of utmost importance for the countries aiming to become members of the European Union (EU). At the meeting of the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993, democracy was listed as one of the key conditions - known today as the Copenhagen criteria – that the countries need to fulfill in order to become EU members. Together with other closely related issues, such as rule of law and protection of human and minority rights, democracy is the part of Copenhagen political criteria, while the economic criteria refer to an existing and functional market economy.

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„Membership requires that the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities“.

Conclusions of the European Council in Copenhagen, 21-22 June 1993

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The issues that can be understood as important for the state of democracy are related to many areas. Therefore, legislation referring to them can be found in many negotiating chapters. Democracy, however, does not exist as a separate chapter in the negotiating process and therefore key issues of certain country's level of democracy can be “lost” in a complex and technically demanding process of negotiations.

To ensure the success and sustainability of the reforms crucial to the rule of law, European Union has, since the beginning of negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia, changed the mechanism related to these fields, putting key chapters 23 and 24 in the centre of the process and demanding much more than mere legislative changes. Also, these chapters are opened among the first ones and closed last, and there is a mechanism that can block opening and closing of other chapters if there is no progress in reforms.

The new approach of the EU has nevertheless been inadequate when it comes to the state of democracy in the candidate and potential candidate countries in the Western Balkans. According to many indicators, level of democracy in these countries is deteriorating in parallel to European integration process, and EU itself has been accused of “stabilocracy” – policy of favouring stability over democracy, particularly through supporting

non-democratic regimes in the region in order to achieve certain short-term political goals.

In the reports of European Commission (EC) on candidate and potential candidate countries (formerly known as progress reports), the issue of democracy is tackled at the very beginning, outside the specific negotiating chapters. Structure of these reports was somewhat changed in their newest edition from April 2018, but democracy is still separated from other negotiating chapter and encompasses following issues: elections, parliament, governance and civil society.

**The State of Democracy in Serbia 2018** represents a shadow report on the areas covered by the “democracy” section in the European Commission’s reports on Serbia. Its goal is to provide the public with a better insight into the current situation in these areas and stress the importance of this matter for the EU accession of Serbia.

**The State of Democracy in Serbia 2018** covers the period from 1 November 2017 to 23 September 2018 and the issues from the area of democracy – elections, parliament, governance and civil society – as well as the media freedom, which, although not belonging in the democracy category in the EC reports, remains tightly connected with these issues and was previously also in the part of the report which is separated from the negotiating chapters, in a section concerning political Copenhagen criteria. It is, along with the already mentioned areas, also covered by this report in accordance with the structure of EC reports.

Previously, Centre for Contemporary Politics (European Western Balkans), in cooperation with the Cooperation and Development Institute from Tirana and with support from the European Fund for the Balkans, published a similar report covering four EU candidate countries from the Western Balkans, “Democracy in Progress: Shadow Report on Political Copenhagen Criteria in Western Balkans EU Candidate States” which covered the period from 1 November 2016 to 31 October 2017. Methodology developed for this research was used during the making of **The State of Democracy in Serbia 2018**.

## 1. Democracy

### 1.1. Elections

Local elections in Belgrade were the most important event during the reporting period. Although they were not national-level elections, their importance was certainly higher than other “regular” local elections, on one hand because of the city’s size (population of 1,6 million, which makes about a quarter of all the voters in Serbia) and economic significance, and on the other because of their possibility to influence political dynamics on the national level.

With the 51% turnout, a convincing victory was achieved by the list named after the President of the Republic and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), “Aleksandar Vučić – Because we love Belgrade”, which carried 44,96% of the votes. Three more lists cleared the 5% threshold: the one led by former mayor Dragan Đilas, supported by the Movement of Free Citizens and People’s Party, which won 18,95% of the votes, president of the municipality of Novi Beograd Aleksandar Šapić with 9,01% of the votes and Socialist Party of Serbia – United Serbia with 6,13%.<sup>1</sup>

The election day itself, 4 March 2018, mostly passed in accordance with the electoral rules. However, minor irregularities were spotted at about 8% of the voting sites.<sup>2</sup> The most often ones included lack of sufficient number of ballots, improper use of the UV spray, lack of the control ballot in the ballot box and opening of the polls later than required. There was also, however, more serious rule-breaking, such as parallel register of the voters, photographing ticked ballots with mobile phones and an excessive number of ballots in the ballot box.

However, the campaign was marred with numerous irregularities and disrespect for the democratic norms and standards, covered by the previous report as well. Firstly, until the very moment the elections were called, it was unclear whether they will be accompanied by snap parliamentary elections, which somewhat disabled coherent action by the opposition.

There were 24 lists on the ballot, including as much as 8 lists representing national minorities (for which 5% threshold does not apply). Their participation

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1 Izveštaj o ukupnim rezultatima izbora za odbornike Skupštine grada Beograda, održanim 4. marta 2018. [http://www.beograd.rs/images/file/9e061ffd10fa1cafe8ecc5dda21fc7ad\\_5309559660.pdf](http://www.beograd.rs/images/file/9e061ffd10fa1cafe8ecc5dda21fc7ad_5309559660.pdf)

2 „Preliminarni izveštaj o monitoringu izbornog dana“, CRTA, 2018, <http://crt.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CRTA-posmatracka-misija-Izves%CC%8Ctaj-o-monitoringu-izbornog-dana-za-BG-izbore.pdf>



in good faith can be brought under doubt, since only one national minority in Belgrade (Roma) makes up for more than 0,6% of population, while the “natural” threshold for minority lists is 0,91% of the votes.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, some lists, such as “Dosta je bilo krađe, korupcije i lopovluka – Radulović Milorad” (“Enough with the stealing, corruption and theft”) were accused of trying to confuse and trick the voters since they were carrying names similar to other opposition lists.

These elections were marked by a noticeable participation of state and local officials in pre-election activities in favour of the ruling party. According to a non-governmental organization Transparentnost Srbija (Transparency Serbia), monitored state officials had, in the four weeks before the elections, 339 activities, 193 of them being promotional. This is 60% activities more than during a non-campaign period (August-September) and as much as 72% more promotional activities.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, these kind of activities were not seen from Aleksandar Šapić and Marko Bastać, president of the Stari grad municipality, even though they also participated in the elections.

President of the Republic Aleksandar Vučić, although not holding any formal authority over the city of Belgrade or any other local self-government, participated in the campaign both directly – “lending” his name to the ruling party’s list and holding several meetings with the citizens in various city municipalities, and indirectly – through dominant media presence.

An argument can be made that media environment was somewhat better in comparison to 2017 presidential elections, since both individual presentations and debates between government and opposition representatives were organized by RTS, Prva, N1, Studio B and Vice (SNS’s candidate did not participate in the N1 debate). However, large differences in media presence, as well as the amount of money spent, and the fact that ruling parties’ officials appeared (in their official capacity) during the 48-hour “election silence” (final two days before elections when media advertising is forbidden), show that the situation in this aspect is far away from democratic standards.<sup>5</sup>

The activities of independent institutions tasked with ensuring the smooth conduct of the elections were also problematic. First of all, City Electoral

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3 „Monitoring lokalnih izbora u Beogradu 2018 – finansiranje, postupanje državnih organa, funkcionerska kampanja i njeno medijsko praćenje“, Transparentnost Srbija, 2018, [http://transparentnost.org.rs/images/dokumenti\\_uz\\_vesti/Izvestaj-o-izbornoj-kampanji-2018-Beograd.pdf](http://transparentnost.org.rs/images/dokumenti_uz_vesti/Izvestaj-o-izbornoj-kampanji-2018-Beograd.pdf)

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

Commission handed clearances to media representatives only after three weeks of the campaign had already passed. This means that, during said period, sessions of this body were closed to the public.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) decided not to keep track of candidates' presence in news and political advertisements, and only answer to individual complaints, much like it did in 2016 and 2017. In that capacity, it censored one political ad of the Serbian Progressive Party, but also, as NGO CeSID concludes, "failed to display a proactive and robust approach in denouncing inappropriate behaviour by media outlets, and did not regularly and promptly report all irregularities".<sup>7</sup>

Finally, National Assembly of Serbia failed to abide by the constitutional provision according to which the first regular session of a year starts on the first working day in March, in this case Thursday, 1 March, three days before the elections in Belgrade. This reminded of the similar situation during the presidential elections last year, when Assembly's sessions had not taken place as well. The move had been criticized by the members of the opposition, who claimed it had deprived them of a legitimate communication channel with the public.

Apart from Belgrade, in the period covered by the report other local elections also took place across Serbia. Monitoring of these elections was limited, but some irregularities, reported to the media and responsible institutions, were more serious than those in the capital.

According to the report by Transparentnost Srbija, officials also campaigned in Aranđelovac, Bor and Sevojno, where local elections were taking place simultaneously to those in Belgrade. The number of their visits was considerably higher than during a non-election period. Ahead of local elections in Majdanpek, on 2 September 2018, president Vučić, although still without any formal authority over the local self-government, held a rally in the town.

The most drastic cases of rule-breaking, however, happened at the local elections in Pećinci, in December 2017. As CRTA members reported, for the first time since 2000 independent monitoring of an election site was not allowed. Furthermore, unofficial registration of the voters was also reported,

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<sup>6</sup> „Belgrade Local Election, 2018 Report by the Centre for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID)“, *CeSID*, 2018, [http://www.cesid.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Belgrade-Local-Election-2018\\_Report-by-CeSID.pdf](http://www.cesid.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Belgrade-Local-Election-2018_Report-by-CeSID.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

multiple accusations of disrespect for the secrecy of the voting were heard, and members of CRTA were forced to withdraw from Pećinci, following an additional amount of pressure.

All local elections were decisively won by the Serbian Progressive Party.

## 1.2. Parliament

The end of 2017 was undoubtedly marked by the adoption of the Law on State Budget for 2018 without parliamentary debate. According to the report on the openness of parliament by CRTA, members of parliament from the ruling coalition filed 400 amendments on the first few articles of the Law, and spent all 10 hours of the debate discussing them, withdrawing more than two-thirds of the amendments afterwards. Thus, no opposition MP was able to speak.<sup>8</sup>

This move, apart from the traditional tardiness in submitting the Law to the National Assembly (it was submitted on 30 November rather than 1 November), represents an extremely serious violation of democratic procedures and principles. *CRTA* assessed the transparency of the adoption of the budget law, the most significant piece of legislation in a calendar year, with mere 19%. In an act of protest to such an event, the site of *Open parliament* organization, which monitors the work of the legislative body, was blacked out for several months, with the caption “This is what not having an open parliament looks like”.

The report itself assessed that, in 2017, openness of the parliament (National Assembly of Republic of Serbia together with Assembly of Autonomous Province of Vojvodina) worsened, falling from 59% to 55%. The openness, *CRTA* explained in the notes on methodology, encompasses four aspects: transparency, accessibility, integrity and efficiency.<sup>9</sup>

The adoption of laws using the urgent procedure, a problem identified by the last-year’s report, is still present. While in the period from 1 November 2016 to 31 October 2017 50 laws were adopted using the urgent procedure, and only 43 using the regular one (which means that in 54% of the cases debating time was limited), from November 2017 to July 2018 (the Assembly did not hold sessions in August) that ratio was 56 to 84.

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<sup>8</sup> „Otvorenost parlamenta u Srbiji 2017. Preporuke za unapređivanje stanja“, *CRTA*, 2018, <http://crta.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Otvorenost-parlamenta-u-2017.godini-pdf.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

The percentage was, therefore, lower – 40%, which is an encouraging trend, but it needs to continue.<sup>10</sup>

The state of the oversight function of the Parliament is still worrying. According to *Open parliament* statistics, from November 2017 to August 2018, during the sessions, 236 questions were posed by the MPs. Not one was answered by the representatives of the executive. Only two times, in March and April 2018, Government representatives attended sessions of the Assembly to answer MPs' questions (in 2017 that occurred only once). This represents a violation of the Article 205 of the Rules of Procedure, which mandate that this activity is carried out every final Thursday of the month.<sup>11</sup>

That the executive branch dominates the legislative one is also obvious when it comes to proposition of the laws – Government proposed more than 95% of the laws adopted during the reporting period. The rest of them were proposed by either government MPs or the Governor of the National Bank (Serbia's central bank), with none coming from the opposition benches.

### 1.3. Governance

During the reported period, no elections were held at the national level, and Ana Brnabić's government successfully completed its first year in office. There was, however, one notable change in the current cabinet – Minister of Finance Dušan Vujović resigned in May due to “personal and professional reasons”. He was replaced by former Belgrade mayor Siniša Mali, who was sworn in on 29 May.

Mr Mali's choice was controversial and criticized by the opposition owing to multiple affairs he is involved in. Some of them include questionable privatizations, possible cooperation in the unlawful destruction of property in Belgrade's neighbourhood Savamala, various alleged misuses of public funds, as well as PhD thesis plagiarism, reported in depth by the investigative journalist networks.<sup>12</sup> He has never been charged for any of these allegations.

The reporting period has also been notable for the ongoing attempts to amend Serbian Constitution in the field of judiciary. The process has been

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<sup>10</sup> *Otvoreni parlament*, <http://www.otvoreniparlament.rs/statistika/zakoni-po-hitnom-postupku>

<sup>11</sup> *Otvoreni parlament*, <http://www.otvoreniparlament.rs/statistika/poslanicka-pitanja>, accessed on 30 August 2018.

<sup>12</sup> „Serbia: Land Illegally Acquired by Belgrade Mayor Returned to State“, *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, <https://www.occrp.org/en/component/content/article?id=6968:serbia-land-illegally-acquired-by-belgrade-mayor-returned-to-state>

led by the Ministry of Justice and so far resulted in various frictions with a part of profession. Public debate was criticized for not being inclusive and transparent<sup>13</sup>, and even the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) acknowledged in its Opinion that the consultation process was, at least at one point, „marred by an acrimonious environment.”<sup>14</sup>

After receiving Commission’s Opinion in June, the Ministry revised most of the amendments in accordance with the suggestions. Nonetheless, the most controversial one, concerning the composition of the High Judicial Council, remained unchanged. In Serbia’s judicial system, this body is responsible for the election of judges and the professional aspects of their work.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to the current constitutional provision, which ensures that the members of the profession outnumber the ones appointed by the ruling parties, the amendment proposes that their number is equal, five to five. The Commission noticed this, stressing in the Article 62 of its Opinion the “possibility that half of the members of the High Judicial Council – including, according to Amendment XV, the President – will be a coherent and like-minded group in line with the wishes of the current government”.

The latest, and, according to Minister Nela Kuburović, final public discussion on the amendments before sending them to the Assembly, took place on 18 September. There was no compromise between the Ministry and professional associations. Judges’ Association of Serbia, in a press release, strongly criticized the amendments, noting that “the Ministry does not waver in its intention to subjugate the judiciary to the executive and legislative branches of government, expanding the possibilities for the political influence on judiciary’s work”.

Apart from the issue of local elections, addressed in the previous part of the report, other aspects of local democracy in Serbia continue to face challenges as well. On 28 April 2018, mayor of the municipality of Paraćin Saša Paunović sent a letter to the Council of Europe, complaining about the pressure faced by his municipality, one of the few in the country not ruled by Serbian Progressive Party.

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13 *Zipovana istina*, NIN, br. 3507, 15. 3. 2018.

14 European Commission for Democracy through Law, Opinion No. 921 / 2018, Strasbourg, 25 June 2018

15 Judge’s Association of Serbia official website. <http://www.sudije.rs/index.php/aktuelnosti/2017-09-25-10-54-45/431-2018-09-12-09-31-04.html>. 18. 9. 2018.

Monitoring Committee of the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities included Mr Paunović's letter in the agenda of its meeting in Istanbul, held on 28 June 2018. Paunović was present at the meeting, along with Nebojša Zelenović, mayor of the opposition-controlled city of Šabac. They were also supported by the mayor of another opposition municipality, Čajetina, as well as 400 members of local parliaments from more than 100 municipalities<sup>16</sup>. A meeting with Prime Minister Brnabić was held beforehand, at which "good will" was apparently expressed, but no further progress was reported.

### Independent institutions

In his annual Report to the National Assembly for the year 2017, Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection noted that the last Report discussed at a parliamentary plenary session was the one from 2013, meaning that for four years Assembly has not met its lawful obligations. This implies, he wrote, that the function of control over the executive has not been fulfilled during that period.

This year, Ministry of Finance refused a Staff Plan proposed by the Commissioner, decreasing the available funding for this institution. Reminding that the Ombudsman was granted a permission for the same document, as well as that Government's official policy is strengthening the capacity of independent institutions, Commissioner assessed this move as discriminatory.

The Commissioner was also critical of two proposed laws directly related to his authority. First of them, Law on Personal Data Protection, the third version of which was proposed by the Ministry of Justice in July, was assessed negatively by the Commissioner, who emphasised that it is below "minimal and acceptable level". He also highlighted Ministry's failure to publish comments on the draft law given by the European Commission, Eurojust and other organizations, claiming that the process requires more "transparency and accountability".

The second law criticized by the Commissioner was the Law on Amendments to the Law on Free Access to Information, proposed by the Ministry of state administration and local self-government. Although he generally welcomed amending this piece of legislation, he also noticed numerous flaws: limiting the

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<sup>16</sup> Paunović: Obavestiću Savet Evrope da je otvoren dijalog o problemima lokalnih vlasti, *Danas*, <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/paunovic-obavesticu-savet-evrope-da-je-otvoren-dijalog-o-problemima-lokalnih-vlasti/>, 19. 9. 2018.

number of subjects the Law applies to (excluding state-owned enterprises), contradictions between the suggested administrative measures and the fundamentals of the legal system, as well as a bad solution for improving the execution of Commissioner's acts.

In January 2018, a new Director of the Anti-Corruption Agency, Dragan Sikimić, was appointed. This was generally a positive development, given the turbulences faced by this position during the past year. Namely, after nine months during which Verka Atanasković served as an acting Director, Majda Kršikapa was appointed in September 2017. Not two months after her appointment, however, the new Director resigned, the reasons still being unknown<sup>17</sup>. Atanasković took over the position again until January.

However, it was soon revealed that the non-partisanship of Mr Sikimić, a requirement for heading such an important independent institution, can be seriously called into question. Not only was he a donor of the Serbian Progressive Party during the local elections in Zemun in 2016 and presidential elections in 2017, he was also a candidate for a member of a municipal parliament on that party's list<sup>18</sup>. Because of this case, *Transparentnost Srbija* called for the stricter conditions when it comes to appointing directors of independent institutions.

Yet another Law proposed by the Ministry of Justice, this time on Preventing Corruption, has also been found controversial. According to the draft, which regulates the organization of the Anti-Corruption Agency, members of the Agency's board, an organ responsible for appointing the director and, in some instances, blocking his decisions, will mostly be selected from the positions controlled by the ruling party (Assembly's Administrative Affairs Committee, President of the Republic, Government). According to critics, this would mean more political influence over the institution<sup>19</sup>.

#### 1.4. Civil society

Civil society organizations in Serbia continued to face pressures and threats during the reporting period. In that sense, it is important to mention *Mirëdita, dobar dan!* festival, organized by Youth Initiative for Human Rights and Civil

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17 „Bez obrazloženja o ostavci direktorke Agencije za borbu protiv korupcije“, *KRIK*, <https://www.krik.rs/bez-obrazlozenja-o-ostavci-direktorke-agencije-za-borbu-protiv-korupcije/>

18 <https://vesti.istinomer.rs/vesti/2018/01/19/direktor-agencije-za-borbu-protiv-korupcije-bio-donator-i-kandidat-sns/>

19 *Gledanje kroz prste*, NIN br. 3533, 13. 9. 2018.

Initiatives from 30 May to 2 June 2018. Organizers of the event were faced with threats from the parliamentary Serbian Radical Party, which tried to stop the opening of the festival, but was held back by the police. Authorities did not react to the threats.

Participation of the civil society in the European integration process continues through the National Convention on the European Union (NKEU), which consists of more than 700 members and working groups covering every negotiating chapter between Serbia and EU. Some successful examples of cooperation include a meeting Working group for the Chapter 35 had with President Aleksandar Vučić on 31 March 2018 in the context of the internal dialogue on Kosovo, as well as meetings Working groups for the Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and the Chapter 35 had with Prime Minister Ana Brnabić on 5 September.

Nevertheless, NKEU also faced certain difficulties in cooperation with the authorities. Firstly, on 5 July 2018, Convention criticized the public debate organized by the Ministry of Defence before the adoption of important state documents, National Security Strategy and Defence Strategy. Criticism referred to Ministry's refusal to extend the debate in order to include organizations that had not received a timely notification, as well as its decision to only publish comments and suggestions that were declined, in many cases without detailed explanation.

The second noteworthy difficulty is related to the call NKEU addressed to the President and the Government on 24 July, requesting that the public is notified whether the internal dialogue on Kosovo, a year after being launched, is still in progress or concluded, as well as whether an analytical report on the discussions held in the context of the dialogue will be made public.

In the end, the role of National Convention on European Union in the process of integration of Serbia was well summarized by the 2018 European Commission report on Serbia, in which it is stated that the expertise of the participating organizations "should be used more systematically by the authorities, in order to benefit from the Convention's full potential".

Data collected by the Office for cooperation with civil society show that Government's Plan of Action for 2018 contains 91 regulations and strategic documents significant for the organizations of civil society, proposed by either Office itself, ministries or special organizations. In comparison to the full number of proposed regulations, this makes a small percentage. Additionally, National Programme for the Adoption of EU *acquis* highlights the



activities of four (out of twenty) National Assembly Committees (European integrations, Human and Minority Rights, Oversight of Secret Services and Defence and Interior) as a good example for cooperation legislature has with civil society.

Financing of the civil society organizations is one additional problem identified by EC's report, which emphasises the absence of stable financing and clear criteria for receiving public funding, especially at the local level. Law on State Budget for 2018 increases the expenditures for civil society by 12 million RSD (about 100.000 Euros), with the entire increase going to organizations concentrating on environmental protection, while the budget of the Office for cooperation with civil society was reduced by 3 million RSD (25.000 Euros). The percentage of the total expenditures spent on civil society has not significantly changed – it makes up for 0,012% of the state budget.

## 2. Freedom of expression

### Intimidation of journalists

According to the data collected by the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS), there were 78 attacks on journalists during the reported period, with 57 of them taking place in 2018. Four of the attacks were physical. Based on this source, it can be concluded that the number of these incidents significantly decreased when compared to the previous year and the previous report. This is an encouraging trend if one considers the facts that their number was constantly increasing from 2013 and 2017, and that 2017 saw the most attacks on journalists since 2008<sup>20</sup>.

The event that drew most attention was a 24-hours long disappearance of a journalist Stefan Cvetković from Bela Crkva on 14 and 15 June. He had been working on a case of murder of Oliver Ivanović in Kosovska Mitrovica in January. To this day, the honesty of his claim that he had been kidnapped remains unclear. The highest state authorities, including Minister of Interior Nebojša Stefanović and President Aleksandar Vučić, were involved in solving this case. Afterwards, the same journalist was beaten in Bela Crkva.

The case of an independent portal *Južne vesti* from Niš can also be seen as a form of pressure on the media. Even though there were no irregularities in its work, the portal was under audit by tax authorities for months. Media

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<sup>20</sup> Baza napada na novinare, *Nezavisno udruženje novinara Srbije*, <http://www.bazenuns.rs/srpski/napadi-na-novinare/pretraga>

also reported the pressures on partners' families, who were told that *Južne vesti* works for "foreign secret services."<sup>21</sup> The portal was later fined because editor-in-chief Predrag Blagojević did not have a full-time employee contract. It was forced to pay a multi-million RSD fine in the form of taxes and contributions to the chief executive's salary. *Južne vesti* argued that this was a "dangerous interpretation" of the regulations concerning public-sector employees and pointed out that the Tax Administration was working on their case extremely quickly, declining their complaint in a very short notice. Portal's editor believes that the pressure was directly related to the work and objective reporting of *Južne vesti*.<sup>22</sup>

Solving the case of a physical assault on three journalists during the inauguration of President Vučić on 31 May 2017 is also worrying. First, the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office dismissed the charges pressed by the assaulted journalists on 17 November 2017, after which the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office filed a complaint in December and adopted journalists' objections the same month.<sup>23</sup> First Basic Public Prosecutor's Office, however, again dismissed the charges pressed by the assaulted journalist of daily newspaper *Danas* Lidija Valtner in April 2018. This resulted in a harsh protest of journalists' associations.<sup>24</sup>

### Legislative framework and implementation of regulations/institutions

Following the departure of the representatives of journalists' and media associations<sup>25</sup> from the new media strategy working group in October 2017, expert Nenad Nikolić also left the group in November, stating that it makes no sense to discuss a media strategy without journalists' associations.<sup>26</sup>

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21 „Južne vesti: Poreska nas gasi propisima za javni sektor“, *N1*, <http://rs.n1info.com/a410694/Vesti/Juzne-vesti-Poreska-nas-gasi-propisima-za-javni-sektor.html>

22 „Južne vesti: Poreska prešla granice, zovu članove porodica“, *Cenzolovka*, <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i- napadi/juzne-vesti-poreska-presla-granice-zovu-clanove-porodica/>

23 „Više tužilaštvo prihvatilo prigovor napadnutih novinara“, *N1*, <http://rs.n1info.com/a351863/Vesti/Vesti/Vise-tuzilastvo-prihvatilo-prigovor-napadnutih-novinara.html>

24 „NUNS: Sramna odluka o odbacivanju prijave novinarke Danasa“, *N1*, <http://rs.n1info.com/a383583/Vesti/NUNS-Sramna-odluka-o-odbacivanju-pirjave-novinarke-Danasa.html>

25 Association of media, Journalists' Association of Serbia (UNS) and Coalition of journalists' and media associations consisting of NUNS, NDVN, ANEM, Local press and Association of online media

26 „Dejan Nikolić napustio radnu grupu za medijsku strategiju“, *N1*, <http://rs.n1info.com/a337634/Vesti/Vesti/Dejan-Nikolic-napustio-radnu-grupu-za-medijsku-strategiju.html>

Ministry of Culture and Information continued working on the media strategy, and in April 2018 presented a new draft. Media associations representatives claimed that a strategy adopted this way lacks legitimacy and refused to return to the working group. Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and President Aleksandar Vučić finally aligned themselves with the position of associations and announced the formation of a new working group and involving OSCE in the process.<sup>27</sup>

New working group, chaired by Ministry of Culture and Information representative Dejan Stojanović, was finally formed in June 2018. Its work on a new media strategy is in progress and it was positively assessed by the European Union.<sup>28</sup>

### Public media services and economic factors

In the reported period, previously identified issues with co-financing media projects through state and local budget remained significant. The practice of allowing grants to the media registered immediately before application submission, as well as organizations that changed their field of work before applying is still ongoing.<sup>29</sup> Media continuously report on the close ties between the rewarded organizations and ruling parties in multiple municipalities.<sup>30</sup> Many other technical irregularities were also noticed.<sup>31</sup>

Journalists' and media associations – NUNS, NDNV, ANEM and Local press – withdrew their representatives from the commissions for media projects evaluation founded by the Ministry of Culture and Information. The reason for this move was the election of “media and para-media workers of questionable reputation from phantom or government-tied organizations” for commission members by the Ministry.

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27 „Zaustavljena izrada medijske strategije“, *N1*, <http://rs.n1info.com/a382175/Vesti/Zaustavljena-izrada-medijske-strategije.html>

28 „Han sa Brnabić o daljim koracima u pristupu Srbije EU“, *Danas*, <https://www.danas.rs/politika/han-sa-brnabic-o-daljim-koracima-u-pristupu-srbije-eu/>

29 „Nepoznatim “medijskim” firmama najveći iznosi na konkursu Ministarstva“, *NUNS*, <http://nuns.rs/reforma-javnog-informisanja/projektno-finansiranje-medija/36702/nepoznatim-medijskim-firmama-najveci-iznosi-na-konkursu-ministarstva-.html>

30 „APATIN: Novac sa medijskog konkursa otišao naprednjacima i prijateljima“, *Voice*, <http://voice.org.rs/apatin-novac-sa-medijskog-konkursa-otisao-naprednjacima-i-prijateljima/>

31 „Koalicija: Nezakonito sproveden konkurs u Mladenovcu“, *NUNS*, <http://nuns.rs/reforma-javnog-informisanja/projektno-finansiranje-medija/36817/koalicija-nezakonito-sproveden-konkurs-u-mladenovcu.html>

The case that attracted significant attention in the reported period was the situation *Kikindske*, local weekly known for harsh criticism of the government, found itself in. The newspaper ran into financial problems and was facing discontinuation, which reminded of the closing of *Novine Vranjske* the year earlier. With the support of Group for the freedom of media and crowdfunding campaign “I defend *Kikindske* – for the next 1000 editions”, the weekly was saved from bankruptcy.<sup>32</sup> This case again highlighted the state of local media, especially those critical towards the government.

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32 „Hiljadu brojeva Kikindskih novina“, *N1*, <http://rs.n1info.com/a381559/Vesti/Hiljadu-brojeva-Kikindskih-novina.html>

# Centre for Contemporary Politics



The Centre for Contemporary Politics is a civil society organisation from Belgrade, founded in 2012, whose activities are focused on democratization, European integration process and regional cooperation. The main goals of the organisation are development and promotion of democracy, the support for the EU integration process and the promotion of European values, as well as regional stability and cooperation. The vision of the organisation is democratic Serbia within united Europe.

The Centre for Contemporary Politics its program goals achieves through the publishing of research and other publications, organisation of events and through other media projects, as well as through youth education. The focus of the organisation is on the research part of its work and active involvement in Serbia's European integration process.

The Centre for Contemporary Politics is a founder of the portal European Western Balkans, a regional web portal in English language, on European integration of the countries of the Western Balkans, through which it realises its media projects.

# *European Western Balkans*

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European Western Balkans is a regional web portal specialized in European integration process of the Western Balkan countries, founded in Belgrade in 2014.

Besides European integration, portal follows the topics related to a common European future of the Western Balkans, such as regional cooperation, political stability and the enactment of reforms in key areas.

European Western Balkans is entirely independent and it is established by the Centre for Contemporary Politics, think tank based in Belgrade.

# Civil Society as a Force of Change in Serbia's EU Accession



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“Civil Society as a Force of Change in Serbia's EU Accession – CS4EU” is a project implemented by the Belgrade Open School with the support of the Kingdom of Sweden. The project aims to support the more active participation of civil society organizations and the media in the process of accession of the Republic of Serbia to the European Union (EU).

Within the CS4EU project, BOS is implementing the Civil Society and Media Support Program in the field of European Integration, which aims to contribute to Serbia's European integration process and democratic development by strengthening the role of civil society and the media.

The project includes 45 civil society organizations and media from all over Serbia in the network of partners who will work for three years (2017-2019) in order to increase the role of civil society in representing the interests of local communities in the process of European integration, ensuring the democratic influence of civil society on public authorities, and improving the quality of public participation in the decision-making process and negotiations with the EU.







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