

# Serbia<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

A successor state of Yugoslavia, Serbia, initiated a delayed democratization process in 2000. The EU accession process, initiated in 2012, has stagnated since 2021. The country has experienced significant state capture since 2014 under the dominance of the populist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), with the political system frequently characterized as an electoral autocracy or a hybrid regime. Due to extensive governmental reliance on media control, political opponents also describe it as a 'spin dictatorship.'

Over the past decade, Serbia's position in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index declined by approximately 30 places to a historic low of 96th globally. In the context of asymmetric political polarization, escalating social tensions, and a highly concentrated media market, journalists face increasing threats, including physical assaults, legal harassment, and surveillance through spyware. Impunity for attacks against media professionals remains pervasive: between 2016 and 2024, only 16% of documented cases of violence or threats against journalists resulted in convictions.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted between late 2022 and mid-2023, characterized by heightened political tensions and prolonged demonstrations. The protests addressed a range of issues, including environmental opposition to lithium mining projects, public outrage following mass school shootings, and armed incidents within Kosovo.

## BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

An average journalist in our sample in Serbia was 41.5 years old (SD = 11.7; Median = 40), and was slightly more likely to be a woman (56.7%). Journalists are generally well educated: 51.5% of them held a Bachelor's degree or equivalent, 21.3% a Master's degree or equivalent, and an additional 1.5% have obtained a doctorate. Moreover, 77.2% of the respondents have acquired formal education or professional training in journalism. This education or training is usually obtained at university or in college (58.9%) as well as through apprenticeships or cadetships (90.3%) and short-term courses (53.6%).

## JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

More than one third of journalists in Serbia (36.0%) worked for a native online media organization, nearly as much for a TV organization (33.3%), 20.1% for an outlet that traditionally focused on newspapers publishing, 4.2% for magazines, 3% for a news agency, and 2.7% in a radio outlet. Very few journalists worked for telecommunications companies (0.4%) or claimed not to have a main employer (0.4%). Regarding area of coverage, 70.5% of the journalists reported they mainly worked for trans/national media, while 27.2% primarily catered to local or regional media and 2.2% had no main medium.

On average, journalists in Serbia had 16.3 years of professional experience (SD = 11.2; Median = 15), with an average working week of 43.1 hours (SD = 12.7; Median = 40; for those in full-time employment). A majority of them (71.6%) worked on a variety of beats or subject areas rather than on a single one. Less than one-third of journalists (29.6%) were members of professional associations.

Almost all interviewed journalists had a full-time contract, either permanent (74.3%) or fixed term (15.3%). There were 8.6% free-lancers or self-employed journalists, and very few with part-time permanent (0.7%) or fixed-term (1.1%) contract. High dependency on one employer, lack of effective union organization, as well as no real market for free-lancers, indicate journalists' vulnerability to internal and external influences, highlighted by the fact that 23.4% sought an additional source of income. Nearly two-thirds reported that they were stressed very often (35.1%) or often (26.2%). Only 14.9% had never or rarely felt that way, while 23.1% felt stressed sometimes.

## SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

Of note, surveillance is the most reported threat (16.4% often and very often, 22.4% sometimes) experienced by journalists in Serbia followed by demeaning or hateful speech (12% often and very often, 22% sometimes), public discrediting of their work, and questioning their morale (see Table 1). The number of journalists who have experienced legal actions taken against them is indicative of the rising number of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) recorded in the country. Workplace bullying and threats that target family also feature as safety threats that take place sometimes.

Journalists were most concerned about impunity for attacks against journalists, rather than their personal physical, emotional or mental, and financial wellbeing (see Table 2), indicating the impact of decades-long unsolved murders of journalists and a low level of indictments for other attacks, which often do not see resolution in court.

<sup>1</sup> Country sample does not fully align with WJS specifications regarding maximum margin of error (see WJS3 Methodology).

**TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS**

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	268	4.5%	7.5%	22.0%	24.3%	41.8%
Public discrediting of your work	268	3.4%	8.2%	14.6%	15.7%	58.2%
Surveillance	268	3.7%	12.7%	22.4%	15.3%	45.9%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	268	0.7%	1.9%	6.0%	10.4%	81.0%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	268	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%	98.9%
Legal actions against you because of your work	268	0.4%	2.6%	10.4%	10.4%	76.1%
Stalking	267	0.0%	0.7%	5.6%	6.7%	86.9%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	268	1.1%	5.6%	13.8%	20.1%	59.3%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	268	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%	6.3%	91.0%
Other physical attacks	268	0.0%	0.0%	1.9%	5.6%	92.5%
Coercion	268	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%	7.8%	89.9%
Questioning of your personal morality	267	1.1%	7.9%	17.2%	14.6%	59.2%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	268	0.0%	0.4%	4.9%	6.7%	88.1%
Others disseminating your personal information	268	0.4%	3.7%	7.5%	12.3%	76.1%
Workplace bullying	268	0.7%	1.9%	9.3%	15.3%	72.8%
Abductions	268	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	268	0.0%	0.0%	1.9%	3.0%	95.1%
Intimidation that targets family	268	0.4%	1.1%	8.2%	5.2%	85.1%

Question: "In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?"

**TABLE 2. WORK-RELATED CONCERNS**

	N	Agree/ Strongly agree	Mean	SD
Worried about losing job in journalism within the next 12 months	268	24.6%	2.60	1.33
Concerned about physical well-being	268	36.6%	2.94	1.30
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	268	47.0%	3.18	1.30
Concerned that those who harm journalists in Serbia go unpunished	268	85.4%	4.37	0.86

Question: "Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

## JOURNALISTIC ROLES

Journalists in post-Covid Serbia prioritized their role in supporting efforts to protect public health, following a period of wide-spread misinformation and mass protests against government's measures. The journalists valued being detached observers and analysts who promote peace and tolerance, point towards possible solutions to society's problems and speak on behalf of the marginalized. Catering to the needs of the audience was more important than scrutinizing those in power, while providing entertainment was valued similarly to motivating people to participate in politics. The least important roles were setting the political agenda, supporting government policy, and conveying a positive image of political leaders.

**TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES**

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	268	89.6%	4.51	0.76
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	268	72.4%	3.99	1.23
Shine a light on society's problems	268	88.1%	4.44	0.80
Motivate people to participate in politics	268	37.7%	3.09	1.27
Provide analysis of current affairs	268	84.7%	4.30	0.82
Let people express their views	268	78.7%	4.16	0.90
Provide information people need to form political opinion	268	70.9%	3.90	1.16
Advocate for social change	267	58.4%	3.69	1.13
Influence public opinion	268	70.1%	3.91	0.95
Set the political agenda	266	15.4%	2.29	1.18
Promote peace and tolerance	268	86.2%	4.43	0.82
Educate the audience	268	81.0%	4.25	0.89
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	268	86.6%	4.31	0.86
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	268	80.6%	4.24	0.91
Support national development	266	54.5%	3.50	1.21
Support government policy	268	10.1%	1.87	1.13
Convey a positive image of political leaders	268	5.6%	1.76	1.02
Provide entertainment and relaxation	268	31.7%	2.93	1.20
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	268	44.4%	3.30	1.25
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	268	45.5%	3.41	1.09
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	268	49.6%	3.49	1.09
Support efforts to protect public health	268	92.2%	4.58	0.73
Counteract disinformation	268	77.2%	4.05	0.92
Discuss future implications of current events	268	89.6%	4.51	0.76

Question: "Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work." (Scale: 5 = Extremely important; 4 = Very important; 3 = Moderately important; 2 = Slightly important; 1 = Not at all important.)

## JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

Journalists in Serbia believed in facts and objective reality, as well as in their duty to alert about untruthful claims (see Table 4). While they value interpretation to make sense of facts, they rather do not think that journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work, nor that the truth is shaped by those in power.

**TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES**

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	268	54.5%	3.51	0.98
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	268	19.8%	2.54	1.03
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	268	28.0%	2.81	1.00
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	268	42.9%	3.22	1.08
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	268	78.0%	3.96	0.87
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	268	23.9%	2.81	1.01
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	268	42.9%	3.21	0.92
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	268	74.3%	3.90	0.80
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	268	39.6%	3.17	0.95
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	268	13.1%	2.48	0.97
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	268	86.2%	4.21	0.74

Questions: "The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." / "Using the same scale, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following beliefs." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

## JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

Journalists in Serbia strongly agreed on the importance of professional standards rather than subjective and situational considerations for ethical reporting (see Table 5). When it comes to the justification of controversial reporting methods, most journalists found it acceptable to use hidden recording devices and use confidential documents without authorization from those in power, but not from ordinary people (see Table 6). Accepting money from sources is not justified.

**TABLE 5. ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS**

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment	267	77.5%	4.16	0.94
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	267	43.8%	3.19	1.16
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	268	23.5%	2.59	1.17
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	268	14.2%	2.27	1.06

Question: "The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

**TABLE 6. JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROVERSIAL REPORTING METHODS**

	N	Always justified	Justified on occasion
Claiming to be somebody else	268	0.4%	33.2%
Using hidden recording devices	267	1.5%	48.3%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	267	7.5%	55.4%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	267	4.9%	47.2%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	268	0.4%	13.8%
Paying people for confidential information	268	3.0%	27.6%
Accepting money from sources	268	1.1%	1.5%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	268	1.1%	22.4%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	268	0.4%	23.5%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	268	0.0%	22.4%

Question: "Which of the following, if any, do you think may be always justified, or justified on occasion, and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?"

## EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

Journalists in Serbia reported a limited but fair amount of freedom in their work (see Table 7). More than two thirds claimed to have complete or a great deal of freedom in selecting their stories and in deciding which aspects to emphasize in a story. Media freedom in the country was rated much lower.

**TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM**

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	268	68.3%	3.90	0.84
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	268	71.6%	3.97	0.81
Media freedom in Serbia	263	6.1%	2.38	0.79

(Scale: 5 = Complete freedom; 4 = A great deal of freedom; 3 = Some freedom; 2 = Little freedom; 1 = No freedom at all.)

## EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Journalists in Serbia found journalism ethics and personal values and beliefs to fare highest among the internal factors influencing news production (see Table 8). They are followed by the availability of news-gathering resources and editorial policy. Among the external factors, most journalists considered access to information and media laws and regulation as being extremely or very influential.

**TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES**

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	258	21.3%	2.77	1.04
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	251	40.6%	3.18	1.12
The business managers of the news organization	238	23.9%	2.55	1.25
The owners of the news organization	237	28.7%	2.78	1.28
Editorial policy	260	56.9%	3.62	1.03
Advertising considerations	221	13.1%	1.98	1.15
Profit expectations	225	20.9%	2.23	1.27
Audience research and data	248	31.9%	2.88	1.20
Availability of news-gathering resources	260	58.5%	3.64	0.92
Time limits	262	51.5%	3.45	1.09
Journalism ethics	264	84.5%	4.28	0.88
Self-censorship	245	12.7%	2.05	1.14
Personal values and beliefs	254	65.4%	3.83	1.04
Colleagues in other media	257	4.7%	1.81	0.93
Friends, acquaintances and family	255	5.1%	1.80	0.97
Feedback from the audience	258	31.8%	3.06	1.03
Competing news organizations	252	7.9%	1.95	1.01
Media laws and regulation	257	58.4%	3.53	1.10
Access to information	249	47.4%	3.27	1.17
Government censorship	240	18.8%	2.10	1.29
Government officials	235	5.5%	1.63	0.96
Politicians	239	11.3%	1.89	1.15
Business people	232	6.0%	1.59	0.92
Public relations	238	9.7%	2.11	1.06
Relationships with news sources	249	21.3%	2.65	1.15
Police	223	3.1%	1.40	0.78
Issue advocacy groups	235	0.9%	1.63	0.81
Scientists or health experts	243	0.0%	2.35	1.16
Religious groups and institutions	227	16.9%	1.39	0.72
Military	213	1.3%	1.25	0.63
Para-military groups, militias and similar groups	199	1.4%	1.11	0.38
Organized crime and criminal groups	205	0.0%	1.22	0.60
Terrorist groups	193	1.5%	1.08	0.33

Question: "Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist." (Scale: 5 = Extremely influential; 4 = Very influential; 3 = Moderately influential; 2 = Slightly influential; 1 = Not at all influential.)