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Aleksandra Nastić, BA

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Dr. Vedran Džihic

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List of Abbreviations

BIA	Security Intelligence Agency
BIRODI	Bureau for Social Research
BIRN	Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
CINS	Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia
EC	European Commission
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
KRIK	Crime and Corruption Reporting Network
NUNS	Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
REM	Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media
RTS	Radio Television of Serbia
SNS	Serbian Progressive Party
UN	United Nations
UNS	Journalist‘ Associasion of Serbia
VBA	Military Security Agency
VMA	Military Medical Academy
VOA	Military Intelligence Agency

1 Introduction

1.1 Research interests

Freedom of expression and freedom of media are some of the main pillars of a functioning democracy. Independent, objective and quality media play a crucial role in providing factually correct and reliable information, as well as in enabling the citizens to make informed decisions and actively participate in the democratic process. It is also a key factor to enabling government accountability and for achieving the full scope of the rule of law¹.

Democracy and media change rapidly as the world, technology, and society also change. Therefore, there is a strong need for constant monitoring and analysis of such changes. We are witnessing a global trend of rising populism and reshaping of the term *democracy*.

Serbia is one of the countries where this populist trend is growing, while democracy (especially media freedoms) is shrinking. We consider important to analyze the Serbian case, as it is one of the frontrunners for membership in the European Union. At the same time, freedom of expression and freedom of media seem to be decreasing in Serbia. Freedom House ranked Serbia in its 2019 report among the countries with the largest 10-year decline in democratic freedoms. What is more, in their last report 2020, Serbia is no longer ranked as a democracy, but as a hybrid regime². Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), European Commission (EC), European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Reporters without borders, The Economist Democracy Index, Freedom House, and many other globally acknowledged institutions and organizations are warning about Serbia's decreasing media freedom. In spite many written and verbal warnings and recommendations, it seems that Serbian government is trying to further suppress freedom of expression and media. Recently, using newspapers and TV stations, which have close ties to the governing elites, seem to have been growing in popularity as a favorite tool for suppressing freedom of expression.

Recently, many countries, which were transitioning into democracy have suddenly decided to leave its democratic course and start going backwards, i.e., following an autocratic path. This thesis deals with the state of Serbian media, since Aleksandar Vučić and Serbian Progressive party (SNS) came to power in 2012. In particular, we examine *how democracy, media and press situation have evolved during his rule*. Media influence on democracy and vice versa is undeniable. We discuss how this phenomenon has been manifesting itself in Serbia.

¹ See Delegation of European Union in Serbia (2019): The role of the EU in promoting media freedom and expression.

² See Freedom House 2019 report and Nations in Transit 2020 report.

Further, *we analyze main methods used by Serbia's governing elites* to suppress media and freedom of expression, as well as discuss their consequences on the society. Finally, we pay a special attention *analyzing such methods/mechanisms and their consequences in the context of Serbia's European Integration* process.

1.2 Methodology

Globally, over the last decade, democracy has been facing significant challenges. Even countries which have strong institutions and long democratic history such as the United States have been struggling to upkeep the democratic principles. In less rich countries, with traditionally weaker institutions and little democratic tradition, populists are rapidly gaining in power and autocratic regimes are spreading quickly. To provide a scientific analysis of such trends, we first discuss current scholar views on the ideal of liberal democracy and the path which democracy is taking in recent years. Inseparable of democracy development is the current trend of autocratic mechanisms. Particularly focusing on the Western Balkans and the European Union we identify variations of democracy i.e. autocracy that will describe and define the current situation in Serbia.

We mainly focus on a time period which encompasses the rule of Aleksandar Vučić. According to most international indexes, this was the turning point when Serbian democracy, including media as Fourth Estate in the democratic started going backward.

The main motivation that drives us through this research is a paradox of how in one country, where the government is using numerous mechanisms to decrease media freedom can be simultaneously making any progress in the European Union integration process. We aim to show if, how and which authoritarian mechanisms influence the media landscape in Serbia.

There are numerous warnings and reports about lowering the democratic establishment in Serbia. For example, regarding the media freedoms. Unfortunately, European Institutions criticize this trend very lightly and keep promoting the narrative of Serbia as a “European partner”. This situation is not very clear nor logical. Why and how can the European Union give up on its core values when it comes to Serbia? Or is it doing that at all? Is there a hidden agenda or an agreement saying that the Serbian government will give something else, and the EU will, in return turn the blind eye to the media freedoms? Many politicians, journalists, and analysts in Serbia are arguing that this quid pro quo might be for Serbia's cooperation during the migrant crisis or even resolving the Kosovo conflict i.e. accepting the Kosovo independence. But is this so-called ‘stabilitocracy’ really worth it?³

³ See Bieber, Florian/Kmezic, Marko (2017): Western Balkans and the EU Fresh Wind in the Sails of Enlargement. In: BiEPAG. P.10.

Blooming corruption, a weak judiciary, which is mainly serving governing elites, numerous intimidations of political and other dissidents, media houses and journalists, serious affairs of ministers' and their family members and close associates involving organized crime, as well as deeply rooted corruption are just parts of the complete picture that illustrates Serbia's reality today. How do we come from this into democracy, rule of law, European values? Mainly with help of the media. Pro-government media paint the picture of Serbia being a prosperous, economically developed country, regional and European leader in all aspects, where rule of law is above all. This is unfortunately opposite to the reality. Not only in Serbia, but also in the region we are witnessing the rise new type of illiberal political system, which declaratively stand for EU integration, but in practice, it is governed through informal rules and clientelism. Both the informal rules and clientelism are part of a toolbox of populist rulers with an authoritarian streak⁴.

Intimidation of journalists, blackmailing, disinformation, financial pressure on independent media are examples of freedom suppression methods, which we will examine in this thesis. We discuss their main consequences, which include tabloidization and captured state. Main reason we focus on these research questions is the urgency to gain a better understanding of current trends in democratic backsliding. Further, it is crucial to understand the exact environment, terms and tools, which enable such trends. Finally, we need to gain insights in main mechanisms of the elites in power to increase their power by "juggling democratic phrases and authoritarian practices". To this end, analyzing media sphere presents an excellent starting point, since it plays an important role in authoritarian systems. For example, media has the power to singlehandedly legitimize many if not all government acts.

This thesis presents an empirical work, which aims to show some relevant and actual analysis for the debate about the freedom of media and democracy, mainly focusing on the case of Serbia. We used a mixed methods approach which includes descriptive, historical, comparative, analytic - syntactic and a case study method as well as quantitative analysis done by other international organizations. The descriptive method was used to describe the democracy and media concepts and their current challenges. Historical approach was beneficial to show the developments of the media transition in Serbia since the democratic changes in 2000.

Comparative method is used in some parts of the thesis to understand the differences or similarities of the regime's media strategies of Milošević rule, democratic phase 2000-2012 and from 2012 until today as well as a comparison of Serbia with Hungary in respect of EU

⁴ See *ibid*.

integration and democratic backsliding process. We are mainly focus on a general trend of media re-schapping in autocratizing states such as Serbia. In addition, we also discuss various reports and research, conducted by domestic and international bodies, analysis of media content, TV and print. Further, we conduct an expert interview with Slobodan Georgiev, experienced journalist of a weekly *Vreme*, former Director of *BIRN (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network)* and current Director of *News Max Adria*. We also quoted many other interviews which can be found on internet as well as documentary films mainly made by *Insider* (a winner of many international awards in investigative journalism).

Qualitative analysis is based on reports from the European Commission on the status and progress of Serbian candidacy, especially chapters about media and press freedom. Public and open data about the financing of media, as well as a report from the Anti-Corruption Council of the government of Serbia, will give us a good picture of the status of the media currently. Finally, we investigate legislation changes, analyze print and tv media programs and conferences for media of Aleksandar Vučić as well as interviews with political analysts and media experts. Synthetic method is applied to draw general conclusion on basis of many examples from the practice described in the thesis.

1.3 Thesis organization

This thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 2 provides a theoretical framework in which we discuss general trends of democracy and the media in the world and the region. Next, Chapter 3 aims to conceptualize the thesis with help of international reports and the context of the EU integration process. It provides a perspective on current autocratizing trends in the region and introduces a concept of stabilitocracy that will turn out to be one supportive factor for a de-democratization process of Serbia. Chapter 4 is deals with media transition that is captured in the transition of the whole country since the democratic changes in 2000. It discusses the environment in which reforms are being prepared, political will, legislative power, and pressure from international community to implement long-awaited media reforms. Further, in the same chapter, we analyze the process of adapting new laws, its practical application, main issues Serbian media are facing as well as main actors in suppressing media freedom and its favorite tools for achieving these. Chapter 5 discusses a growing trend of tabloidization, its roots, how this is being used by governing elites as a smoke screen to cover the last quantum of truth and silence any opinion that differs from the mainstream one. It also explains how this trend, which was present in the tabloids has spread to other newspapers, then to mainstream television and at the end, it occupies Serbian Parliament and threatens to spread like a virus to all state institutions. We decided to dedicate a significant part of our research to this

phenomenon, because it is still not fully researched and because Serbia takes a unique place in the world where tabloidization is spread across the majority of media sphere. Chapter 6 focuses on analyzing media and democracy trends in Serbia during the time of the 2020 global Pandemic. Chapter 7 provides insights into main outcomes of the European Union approach towards Serbia and its influence on Serbia's media freedom. Finally, Chapter 8 discusses the main conclusions and provides a future research outlook.

2 Theoretical perspective of Democracy and Media

2.1.1 All shades of democracy

According to Levitsky and Way “modern democratic regimes all meet four minimum criteria: 1) executives and legislatures are chosen through elections that are open, free, and fair; 2) virtually all adults possess the right to vote; 3) political rights and civil liberties, including freedom of the press, freedom of association, and freedom to criticize the government without reprisal, are broadly protected; and 4) elected authorities possess real authority to govern, in that they are not subject to the tutelary control of military or clerical leaders”⁵.

Habermas argues that following three elements represent a “foundation of liberal democracy: 1) the private autonomy of citizens, each of whom pursues a life of his or her own; 2) democratic citizenship, that is, the inclusion of free and equal citizens in the political community; 3) the independence of a public sphere that operates as an intermediary system between state and society”⁶.

The aforementioned principles are interconnected, hence it is clear that democracy represents all these elements combined, however, only media gives that much space and power for manipulating public opinion and in such a way that in one country, citizens actually believe that they are living in a democracy. Meaning that, through various instruments of the governing elites, military, police, judiciary are in ‘possession’ of the small circle of people in power, however, the media creates the impression of a functioning democracy. The public is manipulated to such a degree that the principles of democracy are presented in a manipulative and populist way or even worse, the image of democratic principles is constantly under attack so that the society begins to think that democracy is evil. The empirical part below is presenting numerous illustrations for this method that has two folded goal; the one discussed above, and

⁵ See Levitsky, Steven/Way, Lucan (2002): *The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism*. P.53.

⁶ Habermas, Jürgen (2006): *Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research*.

the second to send a powerful message to all members of society who think freely, that they are in minority and that the weapon, meaning the media, is not on their side. “The messages that such media pump out—and the public apathy that they promote—help to keep crucial regime elites from defecting and prevent alternative power centers from rising within society”⁷.

Levitsky and Way name four main arenas of democratic contestation where, in full autocracies, all four belong to the ruler, but they also are a chance for the opposition to weaken the current autocratic government⁸. These are: the electoral arena; the legislature; the judiciary; and the media⁹. In Serbia, all of these are endangered due to the fact that autocratic leadership has infiltrated party members into all aspects of the state, including the ones that are supposed to be independent for example the Ombudsman office, Constitutional Court or REM (Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media).

Some scholars suggest that democracy is “mainly based on free and general electoral competition, vertical accountability and the fact that the most powerful political and social actors played the political game according to democratically institutionalized rules”, explaining that “at least implicitly, democracy was conceived as an elitist electoral democracy”¹⁰. Others argue that the elections must become meaningful in order to be classified as democratic and list the following standards to describe how to reach it: “rule of law, accountability, responsiveness, freedom and only low levels of income inequality are the elements of an effective, responsible, free, equal and egalitarian democracy”¹¹. “The more these five elements are firmly institutionalized and guaranteed, the more one can speak of a ‘good democracy’ and the greater the lack of the rule of law, the lower the accountability, responsiveness, freedom and political equality, then the more we find ineffective, irresponsible, illegitimate and reduced, low-quality democracies or, even, autocratic regimes”¹².

Scholars around the globe are on the mission to define and propose a suitable name for hybrid regimes we are living in nowadays. Levitsky and Way argue that transitioning hybrid regimes between democracy and autocracy can be described as “semi democracy”, “virtual democracy”, “electoral democracy”, “pseudo democracy”, “illiberal democracy”, “semi-authoritarianism”, “soft- authoritarianism”, “electoral authoritarianism” and “Partly-Free” democracy¹³. We are witnessing that democratization is not a linear process and in some cases such

⁷ Walker, Christopher/Robert W. Orttung (2014): Breaking the news: The role of state-run media. P.71-85.

⁸ See Levitsky, Steven/Way, Lucan (2002): The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism. P.54.

⁹ Ibid. P.54.

¹⁰ Merkel, Wolfgang/Croissant, Aurel (2004): Conclusion: good and defective democracies. P.199.

¹¹ Ibid. P. 201.

¹² Ibid. P. 201.

¹³ Levitsky, Steven/Way, Lucan (2002): The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism. P.51

hybrid regimes deviate from the well-established “road towards democracy”, thus leading to a form of another regime under the veil of democracy, e.g., authoritarianism¹⁴. Bieber gives an example of Hungary and Poland for de-democratization in previously consolidated democracies¹⁵. Not far from neighboring Hungary, Serbian populist leader is using similar methodology in freedom suppression like Victor Orban with the difference that Serbia was never considered a consolidated democracy, so the road towards full control comes with fewer obstacles and in shorter time.

According to Levitsky and Way, political systems can be defined as authoritarian even though elections are regularly held and free of fraud¹⁶. One of typical examples is intimidating of candidates, abuse of public funds, and limitation of media presence in the media. By doing so, democratic institutions serve as a tool and are being misused in order to ensure the legitimacy and broader support for the government¹⁷. In this way, the elections are won much longer before the election day and the political campaigns in autocracies are an ongoing process. While the legislature is an integral part of a democratic establishment and its violation represents an attack on the democratic constitution, in autocracies things are moving in a slightly different manner. The example of Serbia illustrates how it is possible to improve laws, including the media laws as well, but simultaneously witness the downgrading of democracy. Autocratic rulers and governments are trying to mask the real issues and way of functioning by issuing laws which are not more than a dead letter. In Serbia, government officials would never publicly admit that they are circumventing laws and that these laws are just a facade to show to the international community how democratic the country is. Similarly, they never admit controlling the media, instead, they declare themselves as the biggest promoters of media freedom and pluralism. The need to deceive the public is rooted in the need to retain legitimacy, which, in Serbia is best observed through media manipulation. Many reports in latest years concerning elections and media monitoring, among others, are indicating that Serbia is a school example of the mentioned authoritarianism where elections are more than regularly held and are in general free of fraud. With special focus on the media, we examine below the most relevant international indexes and reports about the media and democracy picture in Serbia.

In addition, since Aleksandar Vučić has established full power over the media, the Parliament and the institution of the President of Serbia, propaganda spreads more and more

¹⁴ See Ibid. P.52.

¹⁵ Bieber, Florian (2020): The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. P. 3

¹⁶ See Levitsky, Steven/Way, Lucan (2002): The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism. P. 53. And BiEPAG (2017): The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion. P.9

¹⁷ See Ibid.

every day. Capture of the media enabled this kind of propaganda, which, in autocracies, according to Keane, “there is a desire and almost a kind of fetish of regimes to prove that they actually have legitimacy in the eyes of the people whom they dominate”¹⁸. Keane’s term for authoritarianism is “despotism”, which he describes as the system in which the “governments, backed by democratic rhetoric and election victories, massively expand their executive powers by means of economic nepotism, media controls, strangled judiciaries, dragnet surveillance and armed crackdowns on their opponents”¹⁹. In his view, “despotisms are ‘mediacracies’: corporate media, journalism, advertising and government merge and meld, especially in contexts where constitutional and political resistance to the integration of organized media and political power is weak”²⁰. Current media framework in Serbia is massively influenced by the autocratic or despotic methods Vučić government is using. “The business-government manipulations are more subtle, sophisticated and (hence) seemingly ‘democratic’ than the heavy-handed political methods of the early twentieth century”²¹.

What Keane names a despot, for Bieber it is an autocrat, a leader who “rules in formally democratic system while displaying patterns of rule that either erode or bypass democratic institutions”²². Džihic argues that a new type of semi-authoritarian governance has emerged, not only in Europe and the European neighborhood but also globally, and that this trend is partly building upon new populist and nationalist moment and is partly a consequence of weaknesses of formal institutions and democratic political culture²³. While it is worrying that de-democratization is taking place globally, it is also easier to analyze one country, in this case, Serbia that follows this trend. Bieber is shaping the debate about the global rise of competitive authoritarianism and he aims to provide an academic and systematic understanding of Balkan Princes’ stabilitocracies in the Western Balkans²⁴. Similar to Džihic, he argues that after the fall of Milošević in 2000, Serbia was characterized by a period of democratization that did not lead to a consolidated democracy but rather reverted to more authoritarian rule with the coming to power of current president Aleksandar Vučić in 2012, which he characterizes as a return to semi-authoritarianism²⁵.

¹⁸ See Keane, John (2014): *The New Despotisms of the 21st Century: Imagining the End of Democracy*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Keane, John (2014): *The New Despotisms of the 21st Century: Imagining the End of Democracy*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bieber, Florian (2020): *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. P.7.

²³ See Džihic, Vedran (2019): *On democracy and its opponents. Notes from Southeastern Europe*. P.23.

²⁴ See Bieber, Florian (2020): *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. P.34

²⁵ See Ibid.

2.1.2 Media in democracy

Freedom of expression, freedom of information, freedom of media and press are one of the crucial freedoms in a democratic society which are guaranteed by the Art. 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights; Art. 10.1 in The Council of Europe's European Convention on Human Rights.

Democracy is the government of the people by the people, said Abraham Lincoln, yet, how do people make decisions without information? This is where the media lend a hand to the society. With help of proper, truthful, and timely information, it is possible to draw conclusions and make decisions for the wellbeing of the society, community, family. Where media is censored and used as a government propaganda tool, there can hardly be any freedom and consequently no democracy. Many scholars and institutions are conducting research with an attempt to name and define these regimes and their modus operandi where media is de-facto jeopardized, but there are still, at least on paper, democratic institutions.

Media and press have enormous power. An event that did not find a place in the news or press, like it did not happen at all. What media is emphasizing or bringing repeatedly to the news, seems to be of critical importance. This is the reason why media enterprises and journalists must have a code of ethics and act according to it. While the code of ethics is truly important, a prerequisite for journalists to be able to do their job conscientiously is the existence of a political will and institutional support in law enforcement. "The media's capacity to act as 'watchdog' or 'Fourth Estate' depends on the degree to which other political actors—i.e., the governing elites, political parties or civic organizations— have fully abandoned authoritarian behaviors and attitudes"²⁶.

Among scholars, there is a consensus about the importance that media play for establishing and safeguarding of democracy. However, there are many definitions and observation angles, that explain why free media is crucial for democracy as well as mechanisms and sociological contexts on how to achieve this. By analyzing the elements that create a democratic atmosphere, we also conclude what are the biggest threats for freedom of the media and democracy.

A significant contribution to the theoretical debate about democracy and media was the introduction of the 'public sphere', to the academic discussion by Jürgen Habermas. In his study about 'structural transformation of the public sphere' he describes the formation of public opinion either as a collective, supraindividual quality or as a mere sum of individual opinions that require public reasoning and presupposes a free press as a key institution of the public

²⁶ Vaca-Baqueiro, T. Maira (2018): Four Theories of the Press: 60 Years and Counting. P.33

sphere. In his view, two groups are a key for a functional political public sphere: i) Media professionals (journalists - in charge of editing news and reports) and ii) politicians who are in the spotlight of the political system. These two groups jointly co-create and are recipients of public opinions. According to this theory, mediated political communication is carried on by an elite.²⁷ The elite represents mainly intellectuals, people of integrity, knowledgeable and educated experts that conscientiously participate in the public debate in the interest of the society. The facilitating role of the political public sphere is mainly to prepare the agendas for political institutions²⁸. Presented work below is arguing that one of the means of manipulation is through control of the public sphere. Autocratic rulers often create own 'suitable' elite that is spreading the propaganda by pretending to be independent and objective. These statements are taken over by pro-government media and so, the debate that reflects on government work is created. This is a simulation of the debate that has various goals, one of them is to cover up the real problems, the other is to manipulate the public opinion and to block the public sphere for academics. On the other side, real intellectuals and people of integrity are being marginalized or, if they criticize loudly, satanized by the tabloid press, frequently with an accusation that they are criminals, etc. (see 5 Tabloidization).

Due to the increasing importance of information and media, modern democracy is often referred to as a "media democracy," an "audience democracy," or "communicative capitalism," which marks a shift from a "party" democracy²⁹. John Keane introduces the term "monitory democracy" to define the reshaping of communicational roles and change of power relations in contemporary society. Parallel and with help of new technologies, it became possible to intensify the communication between citizens and public officials, which he defines as 'the communicative abundance'. Citizens are the ones that "monitor" the government with help of social media and new roles in and cultural and social changes that happened in society³⁰.

²⁷ For the sake of completeness, Habermas is adding five more types among the actors who make their appearance on the virtual stage of an established public sphere: (a) lobbyists who represent special interest groups; (b) advocates who either represent general interest groups or substitute for a lack of representation of marginalized groups that are unable to voice their interests effectively; (c) experts who are credited with professional or scientific knowledge in some specialized area and are invited to give advice; (d) moral entrepreneurs who generate public attention for supposedly neglected issues; and, last but not least, (e) intellectuals who have gained, unlike advocates or moral entrepreneurs, a perceived personal reputation in some field (e.g., as writers or academics) and who engage, unlike experts and lobbyists, spontaneously in public discourse with the declared intention of promoting general interests; see Habermas, Jürgen (2006): *Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research*. P.416.

²⁸ See Habermas, Jürgen (2006): *Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research*. P.416

²⁹ See Štavljanin, Dragan (2012): *Democracy and the media in the era of globalization*. P.81. In: Dean, Jodi (2008): *Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics*. P.104.

³⁰ See Keane, John (2013). *Communicative abundance*. In *Democracy and Media Decadence*. P. 47-48

The media is in the center of the public stage and so, they can easily misuse their function, for example by allowing external political power to influence agendas and frame public issues, by diverting attention from real social problems, not asking ‘though’ questions or just skipping parts of the events in their reports. Economic situation and unregulated media market, where certain media outlets are favored can make easy targets of ‘independent’ media. “Newspapers changed from mere institutions for the publication of news into bearers and leaders of public opinion-weapons of party politics. This transformed the newspaper business. A new element emerged between the gathering and the publication of news: the editorial staff. But for the newspaper publisher, it meant that he changed from a vendor of recent news to a dealer in public opinion”³¹. Considering these developments, it is important to emphasize that if, in one society, there are a few media that are biased and take either pro or contra government positions, but quite a few independent, the overall media situation can be still observed as democratic. But if, for example, almost all media are pro-government oriented or with government ties, and only a few that are obviously opposition media, we can no longer speak about the democratic media sphere and objectivity. Luhman has put it short: “biased press can exist - as long as this is not all there is, and one can obtain one's information independently”³².

Levitsky and Way also consider that the media are often a central point of contention in competitive authoritarian regimes and argue that in “most full-blown autocracies, the media are entirely state-owned, heavily censored, or systematically repressed. Leading television and radio stations are controlled by the government (or its close allies)”³³. Italy under Berlusconi is a famous example of the case where a politician emerged as the owner of multiple media outlets. Serbian elites on the other side are using a more subtle version of the same tool: politicians are not the owners on paper, but the tycoons with government ties, that buy TV stations and in return for positive coverage and control over the program, receive enormous amounts of the state budget. Neighboring Hungary is also an example where the strongman Orban is exercising control over all media and, as we will discuss also later, Vučić is almost copy-pasting his approach and already controlling all TV stations with national coverage, almost all local stations, newspapers etc.

The media is on the top list of concerns for the autocratic rule. Media in democratic societies is a tool for a plurality of opinion, critique, dialog, and debate as opposed to authoritarian regimes where media is mainly a tool for manipulation and propaganda. The authoritarian

³¹Habermas, Jürgen/Lennox, Sara/Lennox, Frank (1974): The Public Sphere. P.53

³² Luhmann, Niklas (2000): The Reality of the Mass Media. P.24

³³ Levitsky, Steven/Way, Lucan (2002): The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism. P.57.

system is built on media control, which governing elites use it to censor certain content and impose on society a view of reality through rose-colored glasses.

Although there is almost no country which is considered democratic, such as Germany, the US, or France, that is free of non-democratic incidents, the western liberal democracy is widely accepted as the closest we have reached so far in terms of “ideal” democracy. The term liberal is connected to a liberal economy, and in terms of media, it means private media and a competitive market. In the case we discuss below, we argue that this principle is being corrupted and misused for market control. There are various pressures to media that report critically of the government, from death threats to economic pressure. “The money flows aren’t determined by the market, and the money goes to media outlets according to political criteria, with a clear bias toward media that back the authorities”³⁴.

“Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media”³⁵. Mass media are shaping our lives and are an integral part of every aspect of it, for example, politics, cooking, sport, culture. What we hear on news is what we believe or at least it’s what we think about. Autocratic leaders are aware of the power of media, hence the need for a full control. Populist and autocrats do not like a dialog, they are fans of a controlled image that they create and place to the public. Since democracy, in its roots is a dialog, we can only observe the means of how the direct confrontation with opposition leaders is being avoided, and instead of it, many creative forms of creation of public opinion arise. In continuation, we mention few of these methods and challenges found in literature that are relevant for our case study.

A method which is used to ‘softly’ censor and create a blurry image of the truth is a case when the *expression of opinions* can be disseminated as news³⁶. According to Luhman, “real events and opinion events are constantly being mixed together in this way, forming for the audience a viscous mass in which topics can still be distinguished but the origin of the information no longer can”³⁷.

Habermas communicational model of deliberative politics highlights two critical conditions: “mediated political communication in the public sphere can facilitate deliberative legitimization processes in complex societies only if a self-regulating media system gains

³⁴ Media Sustainability Index 2019.

³⁵ Luhmann, Niklas (2000): The Reality of the Mass Media. P.1.

³⁶ See Luhmann, Niklas (2000): The Reality of the Mass Media. P.37.

³⁷ Ibid.

independence from its social environments and if anonymous audiences grant a feedback between an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society”³⁸.

Veljanovski argues that it is possible to fulfill this model with association of two direction changes. Challenges of the media system are, according to Veljanovski divided into two areas: institutional (laws) and civil (professional standards). He is arguing that there are two main changes in the media system that lead to a democratic society. These are the democratic and the professional transformation that shall be considered together, as only one is not enough for democracy³⁹.

Since the first is discussed above, we will shortly reflect on the professional transformation that refers to professional journalistic standards and their application in practice. There are quite a few important documents that set out some basic principles of journalistic reporting as well as institutions that safeguard and promote these standards and freedom of journalists, for instance, International Federation of Journalists, European Federation of Journalists, European Commission, Council of Europe, OSCE. At the beginning of the press and media history, the challenge was to distribute the information to a higher number of people, nowadays, in the sea of many information, misinformation, and various manipulations the challenge is to differentiate the right one from the wrong one. This is where journalists shall show their competence and moral and ethical values. One example for the basic standards comes from the Society of Professional Journalists, who name following key principles as the foundation of ethical journalism⁴⁰:

1. Seek truth and report it;
2. Minimize harm;
3. Act independently;
4. Be accountable and transparent

These arose from the Hutchings’s Commission, formed in 1942, that initially had two basic principles: “whoever enjoys a special measure of freedom, like a professional journalist, has an obligation to society to use their freedoms and powers responsibly”, and the second: “society's welfare is paramount, more important than individual careers or even individual rights”⁴¹, even back then, in Commission’s first report, the conclusion was that the freedom of the press is endangered⁴². Today, we face a situation in media freedom that worsened significantly.

³⁸ Habermas, Jürgen (2006): Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research. P. 411-412.

³⁹ See Veljanovski, Rade (2009): Medijski sistem Srbije. P.30.

⁴⁰ Society of Professional Journalists (2014): Code of Ethics.

⁴¹ Straubhaar, Joseph/ LaRose, Robert/ Davenport, Lucinda (2010): Media Now: Understanding Media, Culture, and Technology. P.477.

⁴² Lyons, M. Louis (1974): A Free and Responsible Press.

Professional standards are defined in various papers and by a numerous institutions and organizations dealing with media and freedom of expression but despite these guidelines and common sense, it became a frequent practice of pro-government media to discredit and demonize not just politicians but also colleagues' journalists that report critically about the government and issues in the country.

We understand democracy as a system where citizens are free, equal, and educated. The media complexity and its role in the democracy are not only important for the public debate in respect of making political decisions, but also as a tool for education, and in this case, especially important are children.

Winston Churchill said in one interview before II World War that "Criticism may not be agreeable, but necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body; it calls attention to the development of an unhealthy state of things. If it is heeded in time, the danger may be averted; if suppressed, a fatal distemper may develop"⁴³. Although this might sound wise and correct to most of us, autocrats of the XXI century would disagree. They usually dislike and do not tolerate the critique. In the work below, we present the case of Serbia and analyze how the governing elites try to escape from every critique and how this is reflected in the media landscape.

As outlined in the theoretical part above, autocratic governments play with democratic instruments in an untransparent and abusive manner, these mechanisms are hidden behind a curtain, the play tells the story about democracy, financial success, European future, freedoms, and pluralism in the media. This thesis focuses on such autocratic mechanisms and aims to reveal their details and interconnection between the actors of the play and their abuse of the media theater.

3 Conceptualization of autocratization and role of media on the case of Serbia.

The conceptual framework is divided into two pillars. One is based on internationally acknowledged indexes and reports of international organizations concerning democracy and freedom of the media. Second pillar is related to the transition of democracy and the influence European Union might have on the development on democracy and fostering media freedom.

The conceptualization is based on the theory and the underlying evidences in terms of the internationally acknowledged freedom, democracy and media indexes as well as the

⁴³ Kingsley, Martin (1939): Winston Churchill interviewed in 1939: "The British people would rather go down fighting" in: New Statesman.

international relations development on the field of the accession negotiations towards the European Union. Logical assumption would be that the European integration process fosters democratization and that the case of Serbia is not any different. However, we do find a different situation “on the ground”.

As already outlined above, democratization process is not a one-way street and the recent decade is a proof of that. Below we examine international indexes which show autocratizing tendencies in certain regions around the world. For the purpose of this thesis, we analyze results of globally recognized organizations such as Reporters without borders, Freedom House, Varieties of Democracy to understand the developments of the media landscape in Serbia. Second part is dealing with the accession process of Serbia to the European Union, where we briefly look at the history of this process, its main characteristics as well as selected progress reports by the EU. Special focus is on the period when Serbian Progressive Party came to power.

3.1 International indexes

At the beginning of a summary of Reporters without borders (RSF) regarding Serbian media, RSF reminds that, since beginning of the mandate of Aleksandar Vučić, first as Prime Minister and now as a President, “Serbia has become a country where it is often dangerous to be a journalist and where fake news is gaining in visibility and popularity at an alarming rate”⁴⁴. Such note is a consequence of a constant ranking decrease in World Press Freedom Index since Vučić took office, namely in 2014 the ranking of Serbia was 54, and in 2020 it decreased to 93, which is a significant deterioration of media freedoms in just 6 years.

Freedom House ranked Serbia in 2020 as partially free, in context of Freedom in the World and as a hybrid regime, in respect of Nations in Transit (NIT), which is the worse score since 2001⁴⁵. This report reveals a successful strategy of the ruling party to marginalize and then completely remove opposition from the parliamentary life. In the period of 2016 until 2018, only bills proposed by “friendly lawmakers” were put on the agenda, whereas in 2019, two proposals managed to enter the Parliamentary session, but were then voted down⁴⁶. In addition, SNS disabled opposition to take part in the committees and wasted time during session on unrelated topics, as chapter Tabloidization below may illustrate. Instead of a debate, significant number of laws were passed via urgent procedure, and in 2019, as much as half of total laws were adopted under urgent procedure⁴⁷. Apart from taking note on clientelist relationship between the government and crime, and, pressure on judiciary, the Freedom House

⁴⁴ Reporters Without Borders: Serbia.

⁴⁵ See Nations in Transit 2020 report.

⁴⁶ See Csaky, Zselyke (2020): Nations in Transit 2020. Dropping the Democratic Façade. P.8.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

report ranks media freedoms as the most endangered category out of seven⁴⁸. The report also highlights the propaganda role of *TV Pink* and tabloid *Informer*, which demonize critics and opponents. The role of *RTS* and a daily *Politika* is presented as a “more subtle pro-government coverage coupled with extremely limited space for opposition activities”⁴⁹. Continuous attacks and threats against journalists critical of the government plays a role in the low score of the Freedom House index. This report from 2020 upset the Serbian government and provoked a nineteen-page reply to Freedom House, in which Serbian government expressed dissatisfaction with the Nations in Transit ranking⁵⁰. This answer to the report of Freedom House concludes: “...the claims put forward by the authors of the NIT 2020 report are unsubstantiated and factually unsupported.

They draw conclusions against the key findings of the sources they quote, demonstrating notable deficiencies in their academic correctness and research rigor”⁵¹. Serbian government undoubtedly dedicated time and resources to provide Freedom House with an answer and tried to cancel out effect of a *hybrid regime* ranking but with partially misinterpretation of facts. It might have been more effective to look around and try to improve freedoms, fight corruption and provide institutions with the needed independence. This reply to the Freedom House speaks also about the perception Serbian government has about critique, its attitude towards media and NGO’s. Similar practice of replying to the reports has been started in a neighboring Hungary when in 2018 EP adapted a resolution in which it is stated that Hungary is violating core values of EU i.e.. rule of law. The national Parliament adopted a resolution to support its government against the Brussels’ “blackmail”⁵².

According to the latest report of The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index, democracy had a significant decrease in 2020. Nearly 70% of countries analyzed in the report recorded a decline in their overall score, resulting from a restrictive response to the corona pandemic⁵³. This resulted in the global average score to fall to the lowest level since the index began in 2006⁵⁴. Serbia follows this trend and its rating is lowest in 14 years and worse compared to 2006 (score 6.62). Serbia is also the frontrunner in the region when it comes to

⁴⁸ According to the methodology, there are 7 categories: NDG – National Democratic Governance EP – Electoral Process CS – Civil Society IM – Independent Media LDG – Local Democratic Governance JFI – Judicial Framework and Independence CO – Corruption. See Ibid. P.20.

⁴⁹ Damjanović, Miloš (2020): Executive Summary of Nations in Transit 2020.Serbia.

⁵⁰ Office of the Prime Minister (2020): Freedom House Nations in Transit 2020 Analysis. Refuting the claims of democratic backsliding in Serbia.

⁵¹ Ibid. P.15.

⁵² See European Western Balkans (2021): “Rezolucija Skupštine kao odgovor na Bilčikov izveštaj bio bi ozbiljan skandal”.

⁵³ See The Economist Intelligence Unit (2020): Democracy Index 2020. In sickness and health?

⁵⁴ See Ibid.

democratic backsliding (-0.19 points) and currently holds 66th place on the scale whereby its score is 6.22 index points which classifies it as a ‘flawed democracy’⁵⁵.

One of the new, very dynamic and highly useful tool for measurement of democracy is Varieties of Democracy (V-dem) by University of Gothenburg. This tool gives a variety of different indicators which can be compared on a country basis in different periods or, one can compare different regions, countries etc. For the purpose of our research, we are analyzing Serbia and the selected period is from 1990 until 2020.⁵⁶ The illustration below gives an overview of selected democracy and media related indicators aiming to show how this developed over time. We have used “Original Scale” – Linearized Original Scale Posterior Prediction⁵⁷.

We clearly see when 2000 regime changed, that media were “liberated” from authoritarian pressure and that the liberal democracy index followed this increase. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe that since 2012, there is an explicit decrease in media freedoms and increase in media corruption, media bias and self-censorship. According to some journalists that were doing this job during the 1990s, it is harder to work under Vučić’s “democracy” than it was back in the autocracy⁵⁸. What this illustration also reveals is that this is true and, by some indicators, for example Media bias and Media self-censorship, Serbia had a lower score in 2016 and 2017 than in the 1990s, during the autocratic leadership of Milošević.

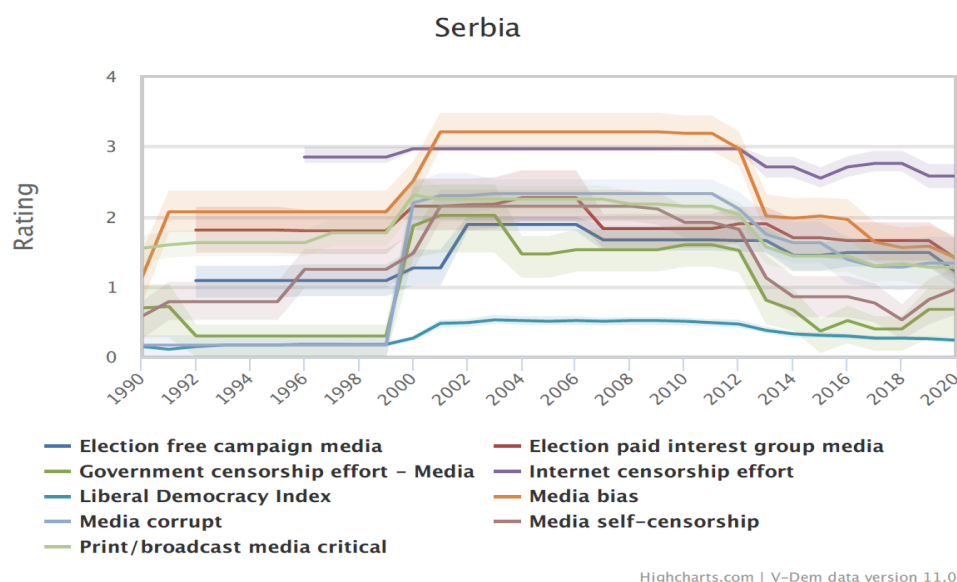


Figure 1 Varieties of Democracy (V-dem) chart

⁵⁵ N1 (2021): Economist: Serbia’s democracy Index lowest since 2006.

⁵⁶ Varieties of Democracy website.

⁵⁷ See Varieties of Democracy (2020): Methodology. P.25.

⁵⁸ Teodorović, Miloš (2014): Olja Bečković: Gore nego pod Miloševićem. In: Radio Slobodna Evropa.

V-dem also measured the status of democracy during the global pandemic. According to its results, Serbia is the only country in Europe which is at *high risk* of the democratic backsliding caused by the governments' response to the pandemic⁵⁹. The graph below illustrates 7 components measured and the seriousness of their violations whereby restrictions of media freedom are categorized as major violations.

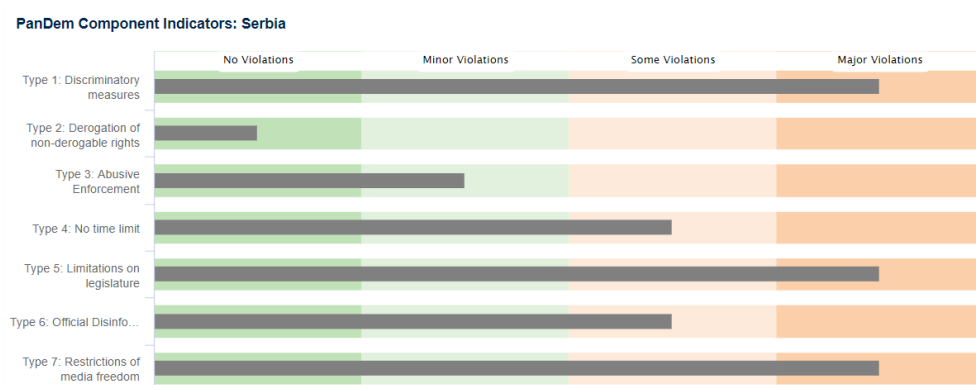


Figure 2 The Pandemic Violations of Democratic Standards Index (PanDem)

Also, the Global State of Democracy shows similar trend and identifies Serbia as one of ten countries worldwide experiencing a severe democratic backsliding from 2010-2018⁶⁰. Interestingly, out of these ten countries, three are European Union members: Hungary, Poland and Romania⁶¹.

Democracy is in decline and every international index measuring it has comparable results. Freedom of media is also proven one of the most endangered spheres. Practical work in front of you is going into depth of this situation by analyzing its roots and its manifestation.

International indexes are undoubtedly showing autocratizing tendencies and specific reports detect single problems. Theoretical part provided us with basic understanding of media role for a democratic constitution and the focal points of weakening of democracy through authoritarian practice. We will examine effects of such practice on the media framework on a case study of Serbia.

Second pillar below is dealing with the process of European Integration parallel to democratization of Serbia. And further below, in chapter 4, we will examine how this declining democracy is affecting the media landscape in Serbia and which authoritarian methods are employed to keep the international community not interfering, while still increasing control of the country.

⁵⁹ Varieties of Democracy (2020) Pandemic Backsliding Project (PanDem).

⁶⁰ See International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2019): The Global State of Democracy 2019. P.18.

⁶¹ Ibid.

3.2 Accession process to the European Union

While the internationally recognized organizations are arguing that authoritarianism is at rise and that freedoms, especially media freedom, are deteriorating, we shall also take note on the aspirations of Serbia in the context of European Union accession.

Since the democratic change in 2000, Serbia strived to become a member of the European Union, after reassuming its membership in international organizations such as UN, OSCE, and many others. Reforms were happening fast, new laws were introduced, the country was changing. Assassination of the pragmatic, pro-European, democratic Prime Minister Đinđić brought a discontinuation to this process, but despite instability, the country moved towards the EU. On a Thessaloniki European Council's summit in 2003, Serbia was identified as a potential candidate, in order to 2008, adapt the European partnership for Serbia. Finally, in 2012, Serbia was granted with a candidate status and in 2014 negotiation process was kicked off. Ironically, 2012 was a year when democrats lost on presidential elections and will hand over also legislative power to Serbian Progressive Party on parliamentary elections in 2014. In his Prime Ministerial expose in 2016, Vučić set a goal to close negotiation chapters by the end of the government's mandate in 2019⁶². Today, in 2021 it seems that Serbian future in the European Union is less realistic than it was in 2016. Translated into numbers i.e. chapters, Serbia's accomplishment looks like following: out of 35 chapters, Serbia managed to open 18, out of which provisionally closed are only 2, and in 6 years of negotiation, 17 chapters are still pending for a future opening and consideration. In 2020, Serbia did not open any new chapter, nor did it close any of the 16 that are currently open. As the biggest obstacle for the integration process, European Union incumbents and reports point at the rule of law: judiciary, freedom of expression and fighting corruption and organized crime, situation in the media landscape which are predominantly reflected in the chapters 23 and 24. Taking all this into consideration, Serbian score in the European integration process is rather disappointing and poor. However, slow progress towards the EU, did not endanger power and support of the ruling party and its strongman Vučić, in contrary.

3.2.1 Stabilitocracy

Stabilitocracy term is a relatively new term in the research. It was used by Bieber to describe EU approach towards the de-democratizing countries in the western Balkans. It can be shortly put as the horse-trading stability for democracy or as "semi-authoritarian regimes in the region which receive external support, in particular from EU member states, for the sake of the

⁶² See Vreme (2016): Ekspoze Aleksandra Vučića 2016.

(false) promise of stability”⁶³ This is how scholars are describing EU approach towards the Western Balkans and it is the most precise term to describe the EU readiness to turn the blind eye to the rising authoritarianism in the region in expectance to preserve stability in the neighborhood.

The stabilitocracy approach is present since the very beginning of SNS rule in Serbia, however, it became counterproductive and turned against the democratic values over time. In one speech in 2017, Commissioner Hahn portrayed situation in the western Balkans as a success, at least comparing to the East, where there are still wars and Turkey, where he saw a backsliding⁶⁴. “I am afraid we are now reaching a point of no return with Ankara. There can be no more business as usual, in which we simply pretend to believe them about their commitment to join the EU, while events on the ground speak a different language, unfortunately”⁶⁵. Although this description of the status in Turkey is used by many organizations to point at Serbia’s development, Commissioner says: “It is vital to keep a credible, firm EU accession perspective to the region as an anchor of strategic stability and reforms. The migration crisis actually showed that the region is already an enclave *inside* the EU.” As a concern and a treat, he only mentions that “a majority of Serbs still believe that Russia is the biggest investor in their country”⁶⁶.

In 2016, Serbia was titled as the “anchor of stability in Western Balkans”. Two years later, and despite the obvious democratic backsliding, German Prime Minister was “impressed by how successful Serbia is on its way to reform”⁶⁷.

Although Serbian Progressive Party is formally declared as a pro-European one, they managed to a great extent to only preserve a status quo in respect of the European integration process. Some argue that precisely this status quo is helped the authoritarian government to maintain in power⁶⁸. Formally chapters were opened, but since there was no significant improvement, they were not closed. This fact however, did not stop the EU from opening new chapters for some years in a row, although progress was rather modest. The reports did show that Serbia is not fulfilling its objectives, but no consequences were foreseen, expect the fact that respective chapter will not be closed until reforms are carried out. Below, we discuss main points which discover why the EU had such tolerant approach towards Serbia.

⁶³ Bieber, Florian (2017): What is a stabilitocracy?

⁶⁴ See Appendix I P.9-10.

⁶⁵ Hahn (2017): Keynote speech by Commissioner Hahn at Princeton University: Europe and the Crises in its Neighbourhood.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Die Bundesregierung (2018): Serbien ist und bleibt enger Partner.

⁶⁸ See Beta (2020): Analitičari: EU zainteresovana za status quo Srbije sa Vučićem. In: Danas.

According to many experts and scholars, the key reason why European bureaucrat's reports are mild is the chapter 35 which tackles relationship between Kosovo and Serbia⁶⁹. European Union seems to be turning a blind eye to numerous affairs, violation of freedoms, pressure on judiciary, and media and many other events that represent direct attack on European values. Friedrich Eberth Stiftung's report also identifies Kosovo as a possible reason why the criticism towards Serbian lack of reforms is moderately expressed and it is added that "... the Serbian government has evidently shown more readiness for politically costly steps when it comes to dialogue with Kosovo than with reforms related to the rule of law and democracy"⁷⁰.

Second issue that influenced European Union's attitude could be the financial crisis in the eurozone, the migrant crisis, the rise of right-wing populism across European Union, Brexit which all combined contributed to raised concerns about the instability of the Union. This led to a different prioritization of the goals in which EU had to focus more on itself and own survival as well as internal reforms and defending core European values instead of focusing on the enlargement and with it associated issues.

De-democratization process across the Union is reflected also in the attitude towards the candidate countries. Logically, member states, which have similar issues like Serbia, for example Hungary gave their support to Vučić and to Serbia. EP incumbent, Kati Piri, agrees with the thesis that Serbia receives support from the EU member states which have similar problems in terms of rising populism, patronage networks that benefit from EU funds instead of citizens⁷¹. For example, Polish former Prime Minister Donald Tusk publicly supported Vučić ahead of the elections. Oliver Varheji, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement and Viktor Orban, Hungarian Prime Minister are in good relationship with Vučić and do not criticize regime deficiencies in Serbia⁷². Tusk, Varheji and Orban all belong to the fraction of the European People's Party group in the European Parliament in which also Serbian Progressive Party is an observer/associate.

Result of such split inside the Union itself, enabled Vučić to juggle with different strategies and further capture independent institutions without getting internationally sanctioned. In favor of that, also a visit of the France president Macron can be observed in this light. Macron on one side used it to underline that the EU is supposed to be reformed before taking new members to its community and Vučić for justifying himself in front of the voters. "The climate for

⁶⁹ See Karabeg, Omer (2015): Stvara li se u Srbiji kult Aleksandra Vučića. In: Radio Slobodna Evropa.

⁷⁰ Burazer, Nikola (2020): Assessing Serbia's progress on the EU Accession Agenda 2016-2020. Friedrich-Eberth-Stiftung. P.13.

⁷¹ See Friedrich Eberth Stiftung (2021): Više od izveštaja – Šta stoji u izveštaju Evropske komisije o napretku u evrointegracijama? 13:06 – 17:26

⁷² See Beta (2020): Analitičari: EU zainteresovana za status quo Srbije sa Vučićem. In: Danas.

enlargement is very difficult, progress does not depend only on us”, and added that “Serbia's economic progress was not well monitored, and they did not notice how much progress has been made”⁷³.

During the integration process since 2014, many European officials had problematic statements that indicated that the true status of the situation in Serbia is not being addressed and reflected in the right way in Brussels. For example, Johannes Hahn, who was back in 2015 a European Commissioner in charge of European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiation questioned that there is censorship in Serbia despite many international organizations like Reporters without Borders already noticed increase of censorship and rated Serbia worse than in the previous years. Commissioner told journalists at the press conference: “I have heard this several times [concerns about media freedom] and I am asking always about proof. I am willing to follow up such reproaches, but I need evidence and not only rumors”⁷⁴. This statement is one of few that were coming from the European Incumbents about the freedoms and democracy in Serbia, which could then potentially have an influence on deepening of the existing problems. According to media experts, European Commission failed to acknowledge bad position of media in Serbia until 2016 which led to the issue spread even more. Numerous journalists were dissatisfied by the previous report of the EU about Serbia which didn't picture a bad situation as it was really⁷⁵.

As outlined in the theoretical part, in competitive authoritarian regimes, media play a crucial role, therefore, focus of Vučić was to control the media and serve his own truth. Serbia is not lonely on this road. “There are 10 democracies in the region today, down from 15 in 2010, while the number of hybrid regimes has more than tripled in the past decade, rising from 3 to 10. There has been little movement on the authoritarian end of the spectrum, with 11 such regimes in 2010 and 9 in 2020”⁷⁶. Analysts note the most similarities with neighboring Hungary, where not only is there a similarity between the ways of building a personality cult and where entire party rests on a strong leader, but also Orbán's strategy of capturing the media is almost copied in Serbia. Hungary poses a big challenge and a threat to the EU values. Viktor Orbán manages to successfully put in practice authoritarian methods in the middle of Europe and the EU still did not find appropriate mechanisms to combat this type of new authoritarianism and prevent capturing of the state. These strategies are always covered by camouflage, they are very adaptive, if needed they would make one step forward and then two

⁷³ Vuletić, Davor (2019): Nova dinamika Evrope. Čemu se BiH može nadati? Friedrich Eberth Stiftung. P.12.

⁷⁴ EFJ (2015): EFJ told EU Enlargement Commissioner “Media censorship is a reality in Serbia”.

⁷⁵ See NIN (2018): Ohrabrujemo i unutrašnji dijalog o Evropskoj uniji.

⁷⁶ Csaky, Zselyke (2020): Nations in Transit 2020. Dropping the Democratic Façade. Freedom House. P.4.

steps backward. Orbán showed how this is done in practice; not too undiplomatic to cross the line, but slowly and strategically working on the pushing the line of tolerance. Declaratively swear to democracy but in fact let democratic principles stay on paper while implementing authoritarian measures in practice. Examples and strategies analyzed in this thesis show how the regime of Aleksandar Vučić is employing very similar strategies, especially using the media framework as a tool for manipulation and creation of a narrative and a discourse which serves as a tool for legitimization of all regime actions. Under media framework, we consider also independent state bodies like REM which are blindly serving the regime and support the legitimization of processes that are in contradiction with the laws, and even introducing procedures that are less democratic in order to provide with even bigger support to the regime.

In the chapters below, we examine the situation in Serbia in greater detail and find where autocratizing methods are most employed and how de-democratization with rising control is influencing the media framework.

4 ‘Old habits die hard’: Media and democracy trend in Serbia

4.1 Democratic transition - missed opportunity

For a purpose of a better understanding of the actors and the media environment, we will do a short excursion to Milošević time and the democratic changes after the 5th of October in 2000.

The civil war in the nineties, international sanctions, NATO bombing in the '99 all weakened power of the autocratic leader Milošević and brought the democratic change Serbia desperately needed. After the 5th of October 2000, the first democratic government (Democratic Opposition of Serbia)⁷⁷ was formed, and expectations were big. After only 2,5 years, Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić was assassinated, which brought instability to the political scene. The following government was a minority one, formed with the support of Milošević's SPS party. This signaled that not all war criminals and their close associates i.e. former elite will be prosecuted. Democratic parties stayed in power until 2012 when, on Presidential elections Tomislav Nikolić, President and founder of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), a party that split from the Radical Party (SRS) won against the Democratic party's candidate and at that time still President of the country Tadić. These, and the early parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2016

⁷⁷ Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS), had broken up into three parts: Koštunica's Democratic Party of Serbia, Prime Minister Đinđić's Democratic Party and the G17 Plus group of liberal economists led by Miroljub Labus.

demonstrated the level of dissatisfaction of citizens with the government of the democratic parties and their coalition with the SPS. Serbian Progressive Party, with Aleksandar Vučić on the lead, won the majority. After Nikolić became the President, Vučić persuaded him to resign on the place of the party President and this is how Vučić became the first man of the Serbian Progressive Party. In a comparable way, Vučić became the President of the country, after persuading Nikolić to give up on running for the re-election. The fact that SNS emerged from the Radical Party of Vojislav Šešelj, and that its main leaders are the nineties warmongers, speaks a bitter truth about the democratic transition Serbia was hoping to end as a consolidated democracy.

The comeback of Vučić, journalist Danica Vučinić described as “the return to power with the verbally expressing different policy but using identical methods he employed earlier in a period when these methods were opportunistic”⁷⁸. Vučić was a Minister of Information in Milošević era that is marked as the dark phase for media in Serbia. In 1998, he imposed a restrictive media law, which, among other things, introduced draconian fines for journalists who criticized the government. This law is seen as a foundation for a hostile blow on independent media. In February 2001, after the democratic changes in the country, the Serbian Parliament rendered almost the entire law ineffective⁷⁹. During his mandate, in April 1999, Slavko Ćuruvija, a famous journalist was killed on Easter, at his doorstep, after numerous attempts to censor his writing by enormous fines that did not give any results.

In short, Vučić evolved from: “For every Serb killed, we will kill 100 Muslims” into a pro-European reformist who enjoys support from the EU and the USA, China, and Russia. Simultaneously to the establishment of a pro-european party, Vučić’s was building and maintaining its own corruption and patronage networks⁸⁰. Bieber assesses democratic development under Vučić as “the rhetorical commitment to EU accession, and a systemic centralization of power around the person of Aleksandar Vučić and an erosion of independent institutions such as the ombudsperson office, control of the media through informal pressure and self-censorship, and the emergence of a strong party, which has taken control over state resources”⁸¹. In an interview for the purpose of our research, Georgiev described this sudden change of political compass as a fraud case: “these people came to power through false stories about changes”⁸².

⁷⁸ Lekić, Slaviša (2020): „Vladalac“, politička biografija Aleksandra Vučića, 2 deo. In: N1. 3:17 – 3:30.

⁷⁹ See Čolić, Nina (2021): Kako je 2001 ukinut “radikalni” Zakon o javnom informisanju.

⁸⁰ Bieber, Florian (2020): P.46.

⁸¹ Bieber, Florian (2020): P.46.

⁸² Appendix 1, Interview with Slobodan Georgiev. P.4.

Many scholars view this period from 2012 onwards as a step back, and even as a democratic journey to the nineties when Serbia was characterized as an autocratic country with an autocratic ruler Milošević. For example, Bieber argues that Vučić employed the methods from the nineties, especially concerning media that was his main occupation back in that time. Other scholar aims to explain how the democrats handed over the power to the newly established pro-European old radicals. The significance of the democratic force for the break of democracy is underestimated⁸³. The democrats in Serbia were not efficient enough in solving burning issues, thus they jeopardized their own power but also the democracy itself. Insufficient commitment to democracy and its core values, and rising corruption and clientelism since 2008, the financial as well as the Kosovo crisis brought to the loss of societal trust and the road was free for the progressive party to win the elections. According to his founding's, already in 2008 backsliding in democracy has started, but since Vučić came in power it accelerated in the direction of the electoral democracy, and with 2015-2016 took an authoritarian turn⁸⁴.

Slobodan Gergiev agrees this view and explains that he and his colleagues saw a shift also on the financial level. Vučić's close associate Goran Veselinović established media buying agency *Right* which soon became the main one on the market, after it took over the clients of the *Direct Media* in ownership of Dragan Djilas after Democratic party lost on elections⁸⁵. Second significant media buying agency is in ownership of a businessman Predrag Saper, who had no problem accepting new terms of work imposed by SNS and its leader Vučić and so the company preserved its place on the market.

4.2 Media reforms

“Different models of media regulation are closely linked to historical or global trends, continual technological changes such as the rise of social media, political turmoil, or market's development”⁸⁶.

In Serbia, the media scene followed the democratic change and adapted to the new regime immediately after the 5th of October 2000. Milošević's media changed side overnight and became bulletin of the democratic parties and the new regime. The roots of the current situation in the media landscape could be seen exactly in this historical moment.

Media reforms were announced several times but are still not happening in the full extent that was necessary to abolish former bad practices. After many years of the democratic government, murders of journalists from the '90ties were not prosecuted and the many times

⁸³ See Vladislavljević, Nebojša (2019): The rise and fall of democracy in Serbia after Milosević P.269-275.

⁸⁴ See Ibid.

⁸⁵ Appendix 1, Interview with Slobodan Georgiev. P.1.

⁸⁶ Vaca-Baqueiro, T. Maira (2018): Four Theories of the Press: 60 Years and Counting. P.80

pompously announced Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System (Media Strategy) was not adopted. Every government in Serbia, to some extent, tried to control the media. The democrats disappointed society by not stopping this practice but only making it softer and less obvious. Since 2012, although many laws have been passed in the meantime, full de-facto control becomes characteristic of Vučić's rule. Where the government and governing elites exercise strong control over the media, press, and media cannot play the role of the "fourth estate", hence the system cannot be called democratic.

In 2001, there were about 1,200 radio and TV stations, which is at least three times larger than it was sustainable for a country of Serbia's size and economic power. This phenomenon is called the "chaos in the ether"⁸⁷.

Reforms in the media sector in Serbia began with the adoption of the Broadcasting Law in 2002, the Law on Public Information and the Law on Telecommunications in 2003, and the Law on Advertising in 2005. In addition, some laws indirectly affected the work and position of the media as the law on Privatization from 2001 or the 2004 Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance. Unfortunately, these laws were not fully aligned when it comes to the media sphere and the Strategy, that was imagined as a guiding document to oversee all these laws and provide a long-term strategy in the field of media could not repair the damage. After many years of delay, the Strategy was finally adapted in 2011 and covered a period until 2016. One of the reasons why there was pressure to implement these laws is the international obligation which Serbia has, arising from the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), aiming to harmonize its regulations and practices with those in the European Union. This need resulted in two major outcomes, one is that finally there was a Strategy adapted and the legislature did change but the other one is that the need to align European laws with the local ones was not so successful. The basis for creating the Strategy was the media study, conducted by experts hired by the European Commission, and the model for drafting the proposal was the experience of the media scenes of Denmark, Austria, and Germany⁸⁸. Many years since the beginning, it became obvious that the governments were unwilling and incompetent to create a document that can be useful and applicable to the current media legislative framework. In addition, the provisions stipulated in the Strategy were not followed by the government at the first place.

Although the Broadcasting Law (2002) foresees the allocation of broadcasting licensees, this occurred with a delay of 4 years. Finally, when the allocation took place, it was followed

⁸⁷ Veljanovski, Rade/Štavljanin, Dragan (2017): The Belated and Bedeviled Media Transition in Serbia. P.56.

⁸⁸ Ranković, Rade (2010): Medijska strategija Srbije. In: Voice of America.

with controversies. The biggest concern was related to selection of the Broadcasting Agency Council's members and the law itself. This law is very similar to European legislation but in Serbia, "we do not have the same rules of conduct as in Europe"⁸⁹ Emphasizing that "reputable experts" in Serbia does not automatically mean honesty / political independence / objectivity, which is a prerequisite for a neutral decision making and allocation of common good – national frequency to objectively selected candidates⁹⁰. One of the consequences of the prolonged "chaos in the ether" and postponed allocation of a broadcasting license meant uncertainty and unequal terms of competition for radio and television stations that were not controlled by the government. That same stations that were a pillar of the democratic change in the 1990s waited for years for broadcasting license and during this time the owners were hesitant to invest in the digitalization and modernization of the media. The outcome is that the programs have lost their competitive edge, thus their survival odds were limited⁹¹. Governing elites have been very successful in manipulating the overall market and allocating the funds to the media they control so that the independent media struggle and with time become invisible. In this manner, they can influence public opinion and with that, narrow space for democratic dialog.

The regime of Aleksandar Vučić did not invent untransparent and controversial law procedures, rather it just upgraded the control to another stricter level. For example, in 2009 the democratic government adapted, under an urgent procedure, the law amending the Law on Public Information that was prepared behind closed doors, without informing experts or the general public. Regardless of objections and warnings coming from domestic and international media associations and the fact that this law is not in accordance with the Serbian constitution and Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the law was adopted. However, one year later Serbian Constitutional Court declared the law unconstitutional⁹². According to some scholars, this legislation is an attempt by the legislator to eliminate media criticism of the government, and this law had damaging effects, mainly in the form of self-censorship among many reporters and editors⁹³.

In line with the goals of the Strategy from 2011, the Law on Public Information and Media, Law on Electronic Media and the Law on Public Service were adopted by the Serbian Parliament in 2014⁹⁴.

⁸⁹ Skrozza, Tamara (2006): Košava sa Avale. In: Vreme.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ See Veljanovski, Rade/Štavljanin, Dragan (2017): The Belated and Bedeviled Media Transition in Serbia. P.59.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Živković Samardžić (2014)

Main changes introduced by the Law on Public Information and Media are listed below:

1. Privatization of remaining publicly owned media until July 2015, which is supposed to create equal starting positions for all media. The only exceptions from the mandatory privatization shall be the public service broadcasters. This change and its success are tackled in the 4.2.4 Privatizing and liberalizing media sector.
2. The public interest in media field is clearly defined, which allowed the introduction of co-financing of media projects of public interest by the state. Transparent and non-discriminatory procedure for the award of such grants is also prescribed in detail.⁹⁵ We tackle this change in the sections 4.2.3 Introduction of Project co-financing and 4.3.2.3 Public interest and public broadcaster *RTS*.
3. Media Register is introduced, which enabled access to the relevant data on publishers and media outlets.
4. The Law liberalizes media concentration regime, which permits consolidation of fragmented market and rise of investments in media business.

The changes that took place by the introduction of the Law on Electronic Media and are concerning the regulatory body for electronic media are discussed in the section 4.2.2 Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media REM.

4.2.1 Introduction of the Media Strategy

The Media Strategy (Strategy) is a core document that was supposed to be an overall strategic document that encompasses all relevant media provisions from other laws and puts a more detailed guidance for the media landscape. Strategy shall be followed by the action plan which stipulates in concrete steps what shall be done as well as in which timeframe.

The Strategy for the period 2011-2016 has set the basic goals for the development of the media sector and defined seven priority areas in which change is necessary: 1. Public interest; 2. Role of the State; 3. The role of the media; 4. Ownership of media; 5. Public radio and television services; 6. Media literacy; and 7. Media pluralism⁹⁶. This first Strategy was valid until 2016, but at the time of expiration, not even a draft version of the second was existing. The working group was formed only in 2017 but soon 15 members left the group, mainly from media associations. Despite incomplete composition, the working group did propose a first draft of the new Strategy. Next year, 2018, after numerous objections, the Prime Minister accepted to form another working group involving relevant media associations. This was done with help of the OSCE as a mediator between the government and the associations. In April 2019, after a

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2011 to 2016 (Media Strategy).

public discussion, a new draft text was prepared. In mid-2019, the government sent the EU Commission a version of the Strategy that differed from the one prepared by the working group⁹⁷.

Again, there was major dissatisfaction of journalists, media associations, the EC, and the OSCE. Under the pressure, Ana Brnabić said that this document was sent by mistake and in the end, the government sent the version which was agreed upon. After alignment with the EU Commission, this Strategy was adopted in January 2020⁹⁸. All these happenings around the working group, members leaving it, then nothing happens for a longer period, sending the version that was substantially different from the aligned one, served the purpose of a continuous diverging from rule of law and preservation of the chaos and status quo the media is living since 2 decades. Trust between the state and the associations has been damaged in such a way, that journalists believe that sending the wrong version of the document was an attempt of censorship by the Prime Minister and not an oversight⁹⁹.

The second Strategy was adapted in 2020 and contains a very thorough reflection on the media sector and the previous Strategy's achievements. It is positive that the government was willing to critically reflect on the Strategy and the overall media system in the document and set a starting point for the successful implementation of the second Strategy. Some of the main findings are related to the environment for the development of freedom of expression that is unfavorable, non-transparent funds allocation, and financial instability of the media. The government's document does admit that the institution that is supposed to safeguard pluralism in the media and secure objective reporting, REM does not fulfill many of its duties and does not function as an independent body. The document also criticizes *RTS* for not fulfilling its main objective – objective and timely reporting and protection of the public interest. The government's report also acknowledged the problem of the editorial independence of national minority media¹⁰⁰.

Although the document of the second Strategy begins with a critical reflection on 45 pages of the first Strategy, it is not a guarantee that mistakes will not be intentionally repeated. Some media experts and journalists believe that “the Strategy is a “wish list” sublimated into a set of determinations and goals on the basis of which a new legislative framework in the media sphere has yet to be amended, adopted and then applied”¹⁰¹.

⁹⁷ See Jaraković, Vladana (2020): *Mediji u Srbiji: U odbrani postojećeg stanja*. In: CRTA. P.6.

⁹⁸ See Beta (2020): *Analiza: Usvojena nova medijska strategija - Bez uticaja na predizbornu kampanju*.

⁹⁹ Beta (2019): *Medijska strategija: Nepoverenje u porastu*.

¹⁰⁰ See Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2020 to 2025 (Media Strategy). P.5.

¹⁰¹ Mirković, Saša/Janjić, Dragan (2020): P.7.

The example of the Strategy shows the power of an authoritarian system that is based on democratic institutions. The Strategy was adopted after other legislative changes, however, since it is not fully aligned with other laws, there are certain loopholes combined with partial non-enforcement, which opens an ideal space for manipulation and control of the media scene. Added to this is the appointment of people close to the ruling party to leading positions in the regulatory bodies that are in charge of fines and allocating funds. By doing this, control is established. In the chapters below we will further discuss the examples of misuse of provisions stipulated in the law as well as in this strategic document.

4.2.2 Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media REM

REM as established with the adoption of the new Law on Electronic Media in 2014, when the RRA (Republic Broadcasting Agency) was renamed into REM (Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media). Its main duties are sublimated in the following: implementing the established policy in the field of media services; improving the quality and diversity of electronic media services; contributing to the preservation, protection and development of freedom of opinion and expression in a manner appropriate to a democratic society¹⁰². According to the law, REM is functionally and financially independent from state bodies and organizations, media service providers and operators. REM is responsible to the National Assembly for performing tasks within its competence.

In the last few years, the politicization and inefficiency of the REM have been perceived by the public and the international community as the main reasons for the poor state of media freedoms in Serbia. We discuss work of REM in order to show the degree of responsibility for the chaos in the media, the roots of the problem and its purpose in the overall political system in Serbia.

As the government has already recognized in its document of the new 2020 Strategy, despite the formally proclaimed independence, REM is positioned between the “state administration body” and the independent regulatory body primarily due to the manner of electing REM Council members¹⁰³. The work of REM is managed by the Council, which has nine members, eight of whom are elected by the assembly of Serbia, while the ninth member, that is from Kosovo and Metohija, is nominated by the already 8 elected members. When the independence of such an important institution is guaranteed by a majority in the assembly, it all depends on political will¹⁰⁴. The SNS holds the absolute majority in the parliament with practically no

¹⁰² Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media.

¹⁰³ See Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2020 to 2025 (Media Strategy).

¹⁰⁴ Insajder (2020): Tačka, 10.06.2020, 13:09 - 13:27.

opposition, due to the fact that the opposition, apart from satellite parties of SNS, boycotted the elections in 2020.

Since 2016, REM is operating without the President of the Council. In the media, Olivera Zekić, as the member of the Council, is almost exclusively publicly appearing in the name of REM. In an interview for Insider in 2020 she said that REM has a deputy President, and that there was no need to elect the President, since the deputy does his job extremely well¹⁰⁵. The deputy is almost never publicly appearing.

She personally had a few verbal disagreements with the opposition leaders for which she says that they have no actual political strategy, so they decided to ‘attack’ REM’s achievements and to blame REM for their own failures. On the other hand, she never criticized current authorities.

Commenting on the fact that in the last 4 reports, the EU identified REM as a key culprit for unbalanced media coverage, failure to monitor and sanction media outlets that fail to meet their programmatic obligations Zekić replied that, whenever any international institutions came for audit, like for example; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) or the United States European Command (EUCOM) “they all say that REM is doing well but in the report they write critiques”¹⁰⁶.

The importance of REM for the functioning of the media sector has been recognized by a number of international actors who mention it in their reports and express concern about the shortcomings. One of them is also the OSCE representative on freedom of media Harlem Dezer who in December 2018 did not meet the deputy President of the Council, but met Olivera Zekić to discuss issues related to REM’s operation including external influence and the need for independence. The fact that REM, since May 2017, is functioning with only 6 out of 9 members and that the parliament of Serbia has failed to appoint members who were proposed by civil society organizations were a subject of big concern for Dezer¹⁰⁷. Nevertheless, despite the pressure from the OSCE on REM and the national parliament, nothing changed until end of 2019 and beginning of 2020 when the delegation of the European Parliament facilitated the dialog between the government and the opposition on the election conditions in the fall of 2019.

One of the main points was the problem of the functioning of the REM Council in its incomplete composition, so the representatives of the ruling coalition agreed to elect missing

¹⁰⁵ Insajder (2020): Tačka, 10.06.2020, 6:15 – 7:35.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ OSCE (2018): OSCE Representative discusses regulation of broadcast media and respect for media legislation with member of Serbia’s regulatory authority.

members of the Council. The entire election procedure was completed swiftly in a month, and at the end of December 2019, three members were elected. Aiming to show goodwill, representatives of the government offered election of two new members of the Council. As announced, this was made possible on 20th and 21st of January 2020, when one after the other, members of the Council resigned although their mandates were about to expire only at the end of 2021. Again, under rapid procedure, the National Parliament, reducing all legal deadlines to a minimum, elected two more members of the Council¹⁰⁸.

The expert public considered that the ruling coalition has an influence on certain members of the Council who would be ready to resign at its request¹⁰⁹. These events were just a show of Vučić with the aim to express readiness for a compromise with the opposition, but in order to keep the European officials pleased by offering a democratic façade. It also shows that everything, including the independent members of the Council, is under his control¹¹⁰.

Slobodan Cvejić became a member of the REM's Council in February 2020 but resigned after only 10 months. He explains that the reason for his resignation disregard for democratic principles, obstruction in work, mobbing. He concluded that "REM is a political battlefield, not an independent institution"¹¹¹. He further explains that the decision-making mechanism in the REM Council is complex and how the mechanism behind the pre-arranged sessions look like. "It is not a banal construction, that someone will turn the phone and tell you what to do, instead, this is a great show in which everything should look like everything is fine. And then give in on small things, which neither matter nor hurt, while the big ones are protected and agreed carefully well in advance"¹¹².

In the document of the new Strategy, following issues were identified that severely limit the organizational independence of REM: "the possibility of political influence in the election of REM Council members, delays in the election of REM Council members, non-approval of the statute, application of regulations on the position of public administration employees and public procurement regulations"¹¹³. The independent regulatory authority is not independent and that the influences from the government and centers of power from the media business are obvious. REM acts as a business partner of private businesses and a service of the government¹¹⁴.

¹⁰⁸ Jaraković, Vladana (2020): Mediji u Srbiji: U odbrani postojećeg stanja. In: CRTA. P.6.

¹⁰⁹ Milenković, R. Mirjana (2020): Orlić: Ispunili smo sve uslove za fer izbore. In: Danas.

¹¹⁰ See Jaraković, Vladana (2020): Mediji u Srbiji: U odbrani postojećeg stanja. In: CRTA. P.6.

¹¹¹ Predić, Ivana (2020): Cvejić: REM je političko bojno polje, a ne nezavisna institucija. In: Cenzolovka,

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ See Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2020 to 2025 (Media Strategy).

¹¹⁴ See Insajder (2020): Tačka, 10.06.2020. 10:25 – 10:50.

4.2.2.1 REM monitoring during election campaigns

Law on Electronic Media undoubtedly prescribes that media service providers have the obligation to provide media coverage to all parties participating in the elections without discriminating. According to the Law, those who do not respect the prescribed obligation can be sanctioned by REM. Also, it gives REM the authority to take action against those who don't fulfill this obligation. Nonetheless, members of the Council of REM insisted that they don't have any authority to track broadcaster's behavior during the elections.

Regarding REMs monitoring of the election campaign, there is, since 2016, a trend of de facto and in some case de jure reducing their jurisdiction. Journalist Danica Vučenić reminds that in the 2017 presidential elections this body declared itself unauthorized for campaign tracking in the electronic media, under the explanation that they don't have suitable software¹¹⁵. This continued also in 2018 when, similar to the previous year, REM gave it over to the viewers to report the irregularities. Consequently, after 68 reported cases, they concluded that there was no violation of the public interest which could lead to the initiation of proceedings or imposition of measures¹¹⁶.

Following the same path of distancing from legal obligations, in February of 2019 REM went a step further: "due to digitalization and objections of the Ministry of Culture" which are not public, they repealed the Rulebook on obligations of media service providers during the election campaign, which specified obligations both public media services and commercial media service providers¹¹⁷. Instead, REM adopted a Rulebook on the manner of fulfilling the obligations of public media services during the election campaign, which not only does not solve any of the problems that arose during the implementation of the previous Rulebook but does not regulate the obligations of commercial media service providers. Unlike public media services, whose obligations are elaborated by the rulebook, a recommendation has been adopted for commercial media, which is not binding¹¹⁸.

Despite the clear, unfair advantage provided by the ruling party and blurred demarcation of state and party activities, also called functionary campaign, recognized by both domestic and foreign election observers as one of the key problems of the election process in Serbia, REM is refusing to act upon these findings. REM Rulebook does not restrict the broadcasting of activities of the officials who are, at the same time, candidates or prominent representatives of

¹¹⁵ See Komarčević, Dušan (2018): Verbalni linč bez sankcija. In: Radio Free Europe.

¹¹⁶ See Petrović – Škero, Vida/Jovanović; Nataša (2020): Analiza efekata rada REM-a 2017 – 2020. In: Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation. P.74.

¹¹⁷ Insajder (2019): Savet REM-a ukinuo Pravilnik o obavezama medija tokom predizborne kampanje, novi nije donet.

¹¹⁸ Insajder (2019): Iako koriste nacionalnu frekvenciju, za komercijalne televizije u predizbornoj kampanji od REM-a samo preporuke.

electoral candidates in the entertainment, information, or any other program during the election campaign. Seven out of ten most viewed TV channels in Serbia with national coverage as well as cable TV stations are not covered by the binding REM Rulebook on the manner of fulfilling obligations during the election campaign¹¹⁹.

This contributed to the worst media image in the political campaign during the 2020 elections as well as to a new REM methodology which will be discussed in more detail in the chapter “Effects of the global pandemic on media and democracy in Serbia”.

4.2.2.2 Non-compliance with the measures

Even when REM initiates proceedings, unusual events occur until its finalization and enforcement. For example, REM initiated a procedure against *TV Happy*, which had the Italian porn star Ciccolina as a guest in the morning program, who, with the approval of the host, showed her bare breasts. Following the initiation of proceedings against *TV Happy*, as the television representatives did not respond to the call of the REM Council, this body “appreciating the degree of endangerment of the protected property and the severity of the consequences caused by the violation, decided to suspend the proceedings”¹²⁰.

Out of all the measures in their authority, REM issued only notices (3) and warnings (4) during 2019. Even in the previous year REM did not impose any of the more difficult measures that are available to them such as the measure of banning the publication of program content and the measure of revoking the license. REM has invested the most resources in advertising control, so starting in May 2019, every month they filed requests to initiate misdemeanor proceedings against four televisions with national coverage¹²¹.

4.2.2.3 Reality programs, hate speech

Slavko Ćuruvija foundation made an in-depth analysis of the effects of the work of REM for the period from 2017 to September 2020. The main finding can be sublimated to: “the absence of pluralism of media content, discrimination, hate speech and gross violations of the law on electronic media and bylaws have marked television programs with national coverage from the adoption of a set of media laws in 2014 until today”¹²².

Yearly REM reports show that TV programs with national coverage do not respect the law. Yet, these findings are being ignored. REM has published that commercial TV programs in Serbia are violating the prescribed norms for the use of national frequencies as a public good

¹¹⁹ See Jaraković, Vladana (2020): Mediji u Srbiji: U odbrani postojećeg stanja. In: CRTA. P.7.

¹²⁰ CRTA (2017): REM decision on Happy TV procedure suspension.

¹²¹ Jaraković, Vladana (2020): Mediji u Srbiji: U odbrani postojećeg stanja. In: CRTA. P.7.

¹²² Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation (2020): Analiza efekata rada REM-a od 2017. do 2020: U nadzoru nad radom emitera Regulator se najmanje bavi zaštitom interesa gledalaca i slušalaca.

for years. According to REM, they violated the law more than 12.000 times in a year, and despite that,

REM is not canceling broadcasting license, although it possesses that right¹²³. One of the pre-conditions for acquiring a license for national frequency coverage is a certain amount of time dedicated to the cultural and artistic program, which these TV programs failed to fulfill¹²⁴.

According to the research of the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation, since 2013, the share of reality programs on television is constantly growing. In 2015 it reached 58,42% on *Happy*. In 2018 and 2019 the share of informative and reality content on *Pink* television was 65,97%, while on *Happy* television it was 74,86% during the same period. Thus, these two TV stations are breaking the law and at the same time, they break their own studies, based on which the national frequency was assigned to them at the first place¹²⁵.

A drastic example is TV station *Happy* which got permission for broadcasting on the national frequency as TV with the content dedicated to children. As children's channel TV *Happy* stopped broadcasting children's programs completely over several years. According to REM's report, there is not a single minute dedicated even to cultural or artistic content on this and other 2 televisions with national coverage in the last 3 years¹²⁶. The question remains, why this TV channel still has a broadcasting license when its program is in conflict with the reason why they were initially granted a license. If we look at what is broadcast in the news program, we can see that this channel serves to spread the propaganda of the current regime, in which government representatives have the opportunity to present themselves every day at various TV shows on these TV stations.

Hate speech and lynching culture of individuals who dare to speak critically about the authorities is growing stronger year by year, both in the print tabloids and on the most-watched televisions, such as *TV Pink* and *TV Happy*¹²⁷. Although it is competent to prevent these phenomena, the REM Council never reacts ex officio, and citizens' reports are regularly rejected¹²⁸. The most frequent victims of hate speech are Croats and Albanians, who are called the derogatory name „Šiptar” with impunity in shows. The report of the European Commission

¹²³ Insajder (2019): Izveštaj REM-a: Komercijalne televizije ne poštuju obaveze; Zekić: Nismo razmatrali oduzimanje frekvencija,

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Petrović – Škero, Vida/Jovanović; Nataša (2020): Analiza efekata rada REM-a 2017 – 2020. In: Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation. P.15. In: Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (2017): Izveštaj o radu izveštaj o radu za 2017.

¹²⁶ Insajder (2019): Izveštaj REM-a: Komercijalne televizije ne poštuju obaveze; Zekić: Nismo razmatrali oduzimanje frekvencija,

¹²⁷ Đogić, Biljana/ Divac, Maja (2017): Pravo na medije: Govor mržnje u Srbiji kao devedesetih. In: Cenzolovka.

¹²⁸ Komarčević, Dušan (2018): Verbalni linč bez sankcija. In: Radio Free Europe.

against Racism and Intolerance (EKRI) of the Council of Europe on Serbia, published in 2017, warns of inappropriate actions of REM in the fight against hate speech, noting that “it is believed that the general lack of action of political influence contributes to limiting de facto independence of REM”¹²⁹. This kind of communication in public arena suits the ruling elite because the creation of the enemy reflects the mantra of constant struggle while the President is presented as jeopardized by a foreign factor, or as a winner in the fight against the mafia, and a hero who leads the nation to economic prosperity, as needed. As stated by Gavrilović from Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI), there is a correlation between viewers of *TV Pink* and voters of the ruling SNS party¹³⁰.

4.2.2.4 Captured Institution

The extent to which REM is ready to circumvent its own regulations is shown by the fact that it rejected the applications of citizens' associations, just because the application does not specify the exact time of broadcasting the disputed content (although as an example, a link to a video posted on YouTube channel, on which the disputed content can be seen in full, and which was broadcast on television with a national frequency)¹³¹ with the explanation that the YouTube channel is not a provider of media services under the Law on Electronic Media¹³².

TV Kurir was issued a license in March 2020, by the Regulatory Council to provide media services for the period 2020 – 2028¹³³. It remains unanswered the question of under which criteria was this channel granted the broadcasting license, considering that this TV channel belongs to the same group Adria Media Group d.o.o as well as the daily tabloid *Kurir*, which according to the reports of the Press Council is at the top of the list of the media that violate the Serbian Code of Journalists¹³⁴.

REM is a strategically important institution and the control of REM means control of many levels of the media framework. REM has the power to prohibit certain programs or TV shows, to sanction non-compliance with the law, hate speech, etc. If REM would act as an independent institution, Vučić and the government would have a significantly harder job controlling the national TV stations and thus public discourse, agenda, and the financial aspects of the media. Yet, in order to control one independent institution like REM, that oversees the media sphere, it requires also control of the parliament, as well as the judiciary. There are

¹²⁹ ECRI (2017): Report on Serbia. P.22-23.

¹³⁰ Insajder (2019): Iako koriste nacionalnu frekvenciju, za komercijalne televizije u predizbornoj kampanji od REM-a samo preporuke.

¹³¹ Report to Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (2019).

¹³² See Petrović – Škero, Vida/Jovanović; Nataša (2020): Analiza efekata rada REM-a 2017 – 2020. In: Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation. P.28.

¹³³ Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (2020): 375. extraordinary sesión.

¹³⁴ See reports of the Press Council.

several steps the governing elites are using to occupy an institution. First, the resources in manpower and finances would be put to a bare minimum, the work of the institution is aggravated by non-compliance with procedures the laws, and then they would use any chance to name individuals close to the party to the key positions. Comparably to the case of the President of the REM Council, the method of non-electing the President but just appointing an “acting” of the function is a wide-spread phenomenon in public companies. According to the recent data, around 2/3 of public companies operate without the executive director but in a status of an “acting”¹³⁵. Serbian Prime Minister and the President are publicly defending this practice although it is contrary to the law¹³⁶. The benefit that the governing elites have from appointing only the “acting” of the function is easier control through formal and informal channels and the possibility of swift substitution. Having this practice, it is no wonder that the governing elite can offer the resignation of two members of the “independent” authority, and all in the name of democracy and dialog, simultaneously presenting it as a concession to the opposition.

By looking into the current state in REM, we can conclude how much power and influence the ruling elite has on the state and media apparatus of the Republic of Serbia. REM, as well as many other democratic institutions, exist because of the international community’s pressure of formally keeping with the pro-European rhetoric. If we look at the dialog facilitated by the EC members, we can see that the current regime does not even try hard to hide this.

4.2.3 Introduction of Project co-financing

Project co-financing was introduced by the Law on Public Information and Media in 2014. The idea was to create space and equal opportunities for all media content producers that could apply for state funds, both on municipal and national level. Since the state-owned media were supposed to be privatized, but the state must protect the public interest, project co-financing was established. It was designed in a way that the projects with highest quality receive higher support i.e. amounts. But, as already seen in other segments, this law was misused to the extent that it became an exact the opposite of the initial purpose. This newly established system now through co-financing favors media working as a propaganda tool of the political parties, mainly the ruling one, instead of the public interest. In the section below, we analyze main issues related to this model of media funding.

Significant role in the abuse of law play newly introduced expert commissions that are supposed to select the best projects. According to the law, members of these commissions are

¹³⁵ See Obradović, Miloš (2020): Javna preduzeca - Partijska lojalnost iznad struke. In: Nova Ekonomija,

¹³⁶ See Insajder (2019): Država u „VD stanju”: Direktori javnih preduzeća i državni službenici godinama na funkcijama vršilaca dužnosti iako zakon to zabranjuje.

appointed by the institution which publishes the official tender, local governments or the Ministry on a proposal of the independent journalist associations (some of the largest and well known are: NUNS, UNS, NDNV, ANEM, LP). Not long after introducing the law, members of new or less-known journalist associations made up the majority in the expert commissions, although UNS (Journalists' Association of Serbia) and NUNS (Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia) challenged legitimacy of these associations¹³⁷.

In 2015, ANEM (Association of Independent Electronic Media) published Legal monitoring of the Serbian media scene for the first five months of the year. One of the findings concerns aforementioned misuse of the newly established law. For the purpose of this thesis, we will only mention a few examples, although in the practice, there are hundreds of such each year.

The city of Belgrade allocated funds for co-financing projects to produce media content in the field of public information on the territory of the city of Belgrade in 2015¹³⁸. The projects in this competition were evaluated by the expert commission in which there were no representatives and media associations, although they duly submitted their proposals for members. Instead, a journalist from *RTV Studio B*, the host of the morning program of TV Pink, a representative of the Media Association was appointed to that commission. The tender was closed with an allocation of 23 out of a total of 45 million dinars to *RTV Studio B* for the program content "Belgrade, good afternoon", which is already broadcast on TV Studio B. Additional 4 million dinars were allocated to *Hit FM* and *Radio Karolina*, which have the same owner as the *RTV Studio B*, the family Krdžić¹³⁹. This practice continued in the years to come, and so in 2017, the city of Belgrade allocated more than 90 percent of the funds to pro-government tabloids, *RTV Studio B* and newly established or unknown companies connected to *RTV Studio B*¹⁴⁰. No media with a critical attitude towards the government received any funds from the city of Belgrade. The situation was similar in Niš and Novi Sad. Common characteristic for all three cities is that the commissions were composed of representatives of little-known associations and the so-called media workers close to the authorities¹⁴¹.

These events represent a common practice which led to a multiple protests of largest journalists and media associations according to which, the funds from local government budgets

¹³⁷ See ANEM (2015): Pravni monitoring medijske scene u Srbiji. Izvestaj br. 60 za period januar - maj 2015. P.6.

¹³⁸ See Ibid.

¹³⁹ See Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ NUNS (2018): Sufinansiranje javnog interesa u javnom informisanju.

¹⁴¹ See Teofilović, Ivana/Zahirović, Teodora/Stojković, Maja/Popović, Dragan (2018): Sloboda izražavanja i medijske slobode u Srbiji u procesu EU integracija. P.24.

is distributed exclusively to media close to the government or to the media that they describe as “propaganda machines of the government”¹⁴². While representatives of unknown associations sit in expert commissions, who split citizens’ money “among themselves”, reminiscent of “joint criminal undertaking which is opposite of the public interest and the purpose of the project co-financing”¹⁴³.

The largest journalists and media associations in Serbia have repeatedly protested together or individually over the way money from the budgets of cities and municipalities is distributed for co-financing media content of public interest¹⁴⁴. These protests usually stay unanswered. In addition, the possibility to file a complaint is not foreseen by the law. The only legal remedy is the initiation of an administrative dispute against the decision on the distribution of funds for co-financing projects. There are no reliable data on the number and fate of these disputes, and even after the court resolves it in favor of the media, there is substantial change of the tender outcome. In all cases, the verdict was reduced to ordering the public authority that announced the tender to issue a new decision in accordance with the law. At the end, there is a new decision, identical to the previous one, except that the explanation of the decision on distribution is more detailed¹⁴⁵.

Next step after receiving funds for a producing a media content in public interest is actually making one and documenting where the money is spent. The Ministry and the local municipalities have no evaluation nor supervisory mechanisms implemented which could ensure that the appropriate content, in accordance with the project proposal has been made and that the funds were spent accordingly. Since there is no control, misuse is a common practice. One example is a case of company “Open View” d.o.o. which was funded with 7 million Dinars for a project co-financing in Smederevo and according to UNS, did not realized this project. The material this company distributed to city of Smederevo was made few years before the start of the project, photographs found in the texts were stolen from other sources and the companies that were paid by “Open View” could not provide with a proof of service¹⁴⁶.

All these loopholes and bad practice was noted by the new Strategy itself. The report identifies following main problems: 1) the manner of tender announcements and the refusal of

¹⁴² NUNS (2018): Sufinansiranje javnog interesa u javnom informisanju.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ NUNS (2018): Sufinansiranje javnog interesa u javnom informisanju.

¹⁴⁶ UNS (2018): Ko je zaradio sedam miliona dinara za prenošenje 15 vesti i pet priloga. In: Cenolovka.

local governments to announce tenders, 2) the manner of selection and composition of commissions, 3) non-transparency of competitions, 4) prescribing discriminatory conditions, 5) inadequate supervision system, 6) lack of evaluation of co-financed content.

The roots of all problems around the project co-financing of media can be looked in a perception of the key function holders in the state: „Here, the authorities, from municipal to republic, believe that the funds that the society allocates for the media can be used only in a way that suits the mayors and ministers and only for those media which agree to these conditions or are owned by those municipalities, republics or provinces, so they have to agree to everything“¹⁴⁷.

Particularly concerning fact is that the media that is being funded by these tenders is predominantly tabloid newspaper, close to the government. There are a few issues in this context. First, these tabloids are constantly engaged in breaching the journalistic code¹⁴⁸. Since the practice showed that regulatory authorities rarely react and financially sanction these newspapers, and the fines defined by law after an administrative proceeding are symbolic, the fines do not harm the budget of these print media significantly. Second, the fact that they are close to the government enables them to access an advertising market with a privileged position. Third, various ministries and public companies spend their budget to buy favorable content in these print media. The fourth is the role of tabloids to discredit all other media, that do not receive, or receive just a small piece of the total budget for their projects. These discrediting campaigns lead to a distorted picture in a public sphere and a degrading of the media who are criticized, when not all facts are being presented. These media are being pictured as a very rich newspaper who criticize the government and in addition to foreign donations, receive also the state funds to ‘work against the government and interests of Serbian population’¹⁴⁹.

Founder of *B92*, Veran Matić names an example of a tabloid *Informer* which attacked several media (*Vreme*, *Danas*, *NIN*, *Fonet*, *Beta*, *Novi magazin*), after they were rewarded with 5.7 million Dinars (combined) at the national co-financing tender. Since on the national level tenders, the rule to constrain media who violate the code from receiving funds is being followed, such tabloids did not get any funds, so they engaged in the discrediting campaign against media which have a critical tone over the government and received budget for their projects¹⁵⁰. Matić adds that the problem is that on local level, these tabloids receive incredible sums, where that

¹⁴⁷ Peščanik (2017): Mediji pod opsadom.

¹⁴⁸ Beta (2018): Savet za štampu: Novinarski kodeks najčešće krše tabloidi i portal. In: Cenzolovka.

¹⁴⁹ Građanske inicijative (2020): Media campaign against civil society and media – case of control by the Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering.

¹⁵⁰ See Beta (2020): Matić: Zloupotrebe medijskih konkursa obesmišljavaju izradu Medijske strategije. In: N1,

elementary criteria is not respected. He also reminded that only tabloids Informer received 5.9 million dinars on a tender organized by city of Belgrade, which is more than the six independent media that they called out on Thursday. Matić is also confident that they will be awarded with higher amounts on the local tenders of other cities across Serbia¹⁵¹.

Matić reflects the situation around media funding and the public interest in Serbia by saying that „the problem of violation and abuse of law which happen on city and local level concerning media tenders besides degrading Serbia on world indices of media freedom, also make the introduction of Media Strategy and the action plan meaningless“¹⁵². He also questions the purpose of the Strategy and the action plan, that is pending for 6 months, if such abuse of law in practice is being tolerated. „Can anyone think that from the moment the law is changed, the government will stop tolerating the abuse of the law, if it does not do it now?“¹⁵³ This rhetorical question reflects non-existent political will to create normal and fair conditions in the media market. This is a schoolbook example of the new authoritarianism, which is blooming with the rising control mechanisms on the grounds of democratic institutions and the good laws. We come to the conclusion that from idea to realization, the road is full of loopholes, irregularities, abuse of law, abuse of power and destruction of the journalistic principals and a blurred public sphere. Project co-financing is just one of the aspects how, through avoidance of procedure manage to half-legally allocate enormous amounts of money into the tabloids which then serve the purpose of a prolonged hand of PR service of Aleksandar Vučić and his party.

4.2.4 Privatizing and liberalizing media sector

Following the liberal democratic model, media that are privately owned have no obstacles to become commercialized successful enterprise. The logic behind is to set a market that can function on its own, without the state interference and will no longer be highly concentrated ownership. The issue with the media companies relying only on the market rules is that the “public interest” is being lost in the profit¹⁵⁴.

In Serbia, privatization of the state-owned companies was one of the most significant goals of a post democratic changes. This general privatization process in Serbia cannot serve as a best practice example, and similarly, the media privatizations are also partly controversial, delayed and incomplete. Free and competitive media market was thought to assure also media freedom, which, it will turn out to be an idyllic imagination. The privatization of the media

¹⁵¹ See Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ See Vaca-Baqueiro, T. Maira (2018): Four Theories of the Press: 60 Years and Counting. P.79.

cannot be set as a sole goal because it is not sufficient to guarantee the establishment of a professional media environment if not accompanied by other necessary measures, where one of the most significant is to enable equal business opportunities for all media¹⁵⁵. “The lack of transparency due to vested political and business interests stands in the way of completing the comprehensive media reforms which would enable the media to serve the public interests”¹⁵⁶.

As it will turn out, privatization process was not only delayed, but is also incomplete until today. Country wide important media such as the oldest daily newspaper in the Balkans *Politika* (Politics), or *Vecernje Novosti* (The Evening News), and *Dnevnik* (The News), as well as the news agency *Tanjug*, continued to work for years despite the deadlines for privatization being set in the years after the democratic change. The situation with privatization of the local media was similar to the nation-wide media¹⁵⁷. With the case of state breaching its own laws multiple times, and at the same time working against the principles of the liberal competitive market contributed to uneven game which had serious of negative consequences one of them being that the private media strive to survive in all possible ways, whereby some media use unacceptable tools¹⁵⁸.

Case of *Tanjug* is an interesting one, it shows on a relatively small example how autocratic government can formally fulfill goal stipulated in the Media Strategy, but still not actually “exit” from the media. Namely, *Tanjug* was shot down six years ago but has continued working despite and eventually in 2021, as stipulated in the Media Strategy in 2020, the public company *News Agency Tanjug* was deleted from the Business Registers Agency. In 2020, company *Tačno* acquired the right to use the property rights of the *Tanjug* news agency for 628,000 Euros in the next ten years. This company is owned by Radio-Television *Pančevo*, whose owner is Radoica Milosavljević and the company *Minacord media* whose representatives are Željko Joksimović and Manja Grčić. We discuss about other media Milosavljević owns in the next session. Interestingly, new Editor in chief of this new *Tanjug* is a former moderator of one of the TV stations with national coverage, who proved to be loyal to the ruling party and at the same time wife of a co-owner Joksimović. Opinion about the privatization i.e. shutting down and renting *Tanjug* name of its former employee and a current Editor in chief of *FoNet* agency, is clear: “it is a sad finale in journalistic, media, state, social and political terms”¹⁵⁹. The director of the *Beta news agency*, is convinced that the government took this step because it is sure that

¹⁵⁵ Veljanovski, Rade/Štavljanin, Dragan (2017): The Belated and Bedeviled Media Transition in Serbia. P.62.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ For example: Grbić, Marija (2020): Hoće li se konačno završiti s privatizacijom državnih medija? I da li će s tim biti ok i RTV OK iz Kovačice? In: Cenzolovka.

¹⁵⁸ Blečić, Miodrag (2021): Nekada oficir JNA, danas medijski mogul. In: Cenzolovka, /

¹⁵⁹ See NewsmaxAdria (2021): Pregled dana, Tanjug, 29:30 – 36:17

Tanjug will continue to be a propaganda newspaper, and adds that everything related to this transaction is disputable, from unknown tax amounts, to costs of equipment, renting the facility etc¹⁶⁰.

Now that we looked at the media outlets where the law was not applied, we shall also discuss the media that were actually privatized. Media experts conclude that the privatization of local media ended in its destruction¹⁶¹. Through privatization process, ruling party SNS had the opportunity to buy majority of local media across Serbia and to easily put this sector of media under control. For example, businessman with SNS ties, Radoica Milosavljević, bought 13 local media across the country¹⁶². Milosavljević was one of 27 businessmen that are not officially members of the SNS but have donated real-estate to the SNS party¹⁶³. It is worth mentioning in this place that Milosavljević bought *RTK* for price of 85.500 Euros and only few days after the transaction, the city of Kragujevac subsidizes this private TV station with 250.000 Euros¹⁶⁴. Example of Radoica Milosavljević is the most extreme one, in terms of the number of TV stations he owns, but not the only individual with the similar story during the privatization process in Serbia.

These events open a broad topic of local media landscape, which, according to these indicators is even less free and more controlled. Often, local media topics go under the radar of the wider and international public and hence are easier catch for the ruling elite.

Although there are many suspicious transactions during the yearlong privatization process, we will mention only one more, because it is connected to the state-owned company Telekom. A businessman and SNS trustee in Niš, Zvezdan Milovanović is a director of Kopernikus cable network, which, in privatization process bought new radio stations, as well as a local TV station and a local weekly newspaper. Milovanović is also an owner of the cable channels of Kopernikus. More interesting than a highly positioned person in the ruling party on a local level buying media is the fact that the state-owned Telecom, in 2018 bought Kopernikus cable operator in a transaction worth 195m Euros¹⁶⁵. At the moment of the transaction, 49% of the Kopernikus cable operator belonged to Srdjan Milovanović, brother of Zvezdan, who immediately afterwards, for almost same amount buys TV *Prva* and TV *O2*, two television stations with

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ See Dimitrijević, S (2020): Pustoš među lokalnim medijima proglasili smo za slobodu. In: Cenzolovka.

¹⁶² List of media in Milosavljević's ownership (ex and current): Telemark, SOS kanal plus, TV Leskovac, RTV Kruševac, RTV Caribrod, RTV Kanal M, TV Pirot, TV Požega, RTV Santos, RTV Bačka Palanka, RTV Brus, Centar za informisanje Novi Kneževac i RTV Pančevo.

¹⁶³ Kostić, Vladimir (2019): Radoica Milosavljević među 27 donatora prostorija SNS-u. In CINS.

¹⁶⁴ See Insajder (2020): TAČKA 2: Mediji kao mehanizam uz pomoć kojeg se lakše vlada.

¹⁶⁵ See Insajder (2020): TAČKA 2: Mediji kao mehanizam uz pomoć kojeg se lakše vlada.

national coverage¹⁶⁶. The necessity of this transaction for a state-owned Telecom is debatable on a financial side, but there is another aspect: many journalists and experts warn that this was one of the ways to put under control remaining two TV stations with national coverage¹⁶⁷.

4.3 Discussion on main practical consequences of the media reforms

4.3.1 Findings of the Anti-Corruption Council

A significant factor in the fight against corruption since the democratic change is the Anti-Corruption Council. The Council is an expert, advisory body of the government, founded with a mission to see all the aspects of anti-corruption activities, to propose measures to be taken to fight corruption effectively, to monitor their implementation, and to make proposals for bringing regulations, programs and other acts and measures in this area¹⁶⁸. The Council has greatly contributed to the fight against corruption in the media, if nothing else, at least because of the reports that are delivered to the government of Serbia and then also published. These reports show that there is corruption and abuse, and thus explaining what the media world in Serbia looks like, the way the state is involved in embezzlement and control of freedom of expression. Reports are very detailed and broad; they point to systematic mismanagement and represent a good starting point for anyone who wants to understand the media in Serbia. There are three reports in the last 10 years that touch upon the topic of the media framework in Serbia.

Another aspect interesting for this thesis is that first report was published in 2011 when Democratic party in coalition with the Socialist Party was in power and the second and third in 2015 captured the power shift and the moment when SNS took the political wheel. These reports also show how the elites abuse power, subordinate the laws and capture state to fulfill their personal interest at the cost of the state budget, freedom of expression, association and speech, human rights and endanger the independence of institutions. The focus of our analysis of these reports is the media sphere and the fields related to it.

In 2011, the Council published a report for the period of 2008 to June 2010. According to the Council's analysis of the extensive documentation, three main problems in the media were noticeable:

1. non-transparency of media ownership;
2. economic influence of state institutions on the work of the media through different types of budget allocations; more than 15m Euros a year were relocated to the media through state

¹⁶⁶ See Georgiev, Slobodan (2019): 10 Najvećih naprednjačkih afera. Nasleđe Aleksandra Vučića. In: Vreme.

¹⁶⁷ See Živanović, Katarina (2018): Novi vlasnik TV Prva i 02: Uređivačka politika se neće menjati. In: Danas.

¹⁶⁸ See Anti-Corruption Council of the Government of Republic of Serbia: Founding and jurisdiction.

institutions and companies, such as Telekom, the Privatization Agency, and ministries. In return, according to the Council's findings, it was “almost impossible to find an analytical text, i.e. an investigative approach of journalists when reporting on the work of these institutions in the media”.

3. The problem of *RTS*, which instead of public service, has the role of political service to the parties and ruling elites. The consequence is media closure and other numerous problems that Serbia is facing, including the problem of corruption¹⁶⁹.

In 2015, the Council published another report on the ownership structure and control of the media in Serbia. The difference between the first and the second report is that two more key points: 4. censorship and self-censorship, and 5. tabloidization were added to the existing problems, already discussed in the report from 2011. It was concluded that the media in Serbia do not control the government and its effects; on the contrary, the media are in fact controlled by the authorities¹⁷⁰. Taking into consideration that the tabloidization was perceived as a new problem in 2015 which evolved during years, we dedicated a significant part of this thesis to deeper analyze this problem.

As a result of control by the government, the ruling elite, and the businessmen associated with them, it is not in anyone's interest to report on the Council's document in the media, so the report was barely mentioned and the main findings of the report were bypassed, except in a few newspapers. The general public has not had the opportunity to hear almost anything relevant to them from the report.

Now we are in 2021 and the country's situation got significantly worse even compared to 2015. After publishing the 2011 report Verica Barać, known for being a symbol of the fight against corruption, was a subject of several public “responses” by for example the CEO of *RTS* and the chief editor of *Politika* newspaper which has expressed their disagreement with a sharp tone of Verica's report about the government's control of the media. One of the subjects mentioned in the report was the company of the vice President of the Democratic party (governing at that time) and a mayor of Belgrade Dragan Đilas. He, unlike other politicians today, did not publicly attack nor intimidate Verica Barać. The obvious difference in the government's approach towards experts with integrity is that the members of the SNS don't shy away from using the most horrible smear campaigns, where also families get dragged in, as it is the case with Jelisaveta Vasilić, Rodoljub Sabić (Commissioner), Saša Janković (Protector of Citizens) and

¹⁶⁹ See Anti-Corruption Council of the Government of the Republic of Serbia (2011): Report on Pressures on and Control of Media in Serbia. P.3.

¹⁷⁰ See Anti-Corruption Council of the Government of the Republic of Serbia (2015): Report on the Possible Impact of Public Sector Institutions on Media, through Financing of Advertising and Marketing Services.

many others while the former government was mostly ignoring them and their findings. After publishing the report in 2015, on two separate occasions members of the Council, Miroslava Milenović and Ivan Ninić were even physically attacked¹⁷¹.

Vasilić, member of the Anti-Corruption Council was a victim of a dirty and disturbing campaign managed by the highest representatives of the governing elite. After an interview in a weekly newspaper, *NIN*, where she stated that the Council is gathering documentation on former agriculture, combines in Vojvodina and added that “whoever speaks to Vojvodina farmers says that Andrej Vučić (brother of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić) is the main person buying land and that everything goes through him” she became a target of serious insults¹⁷². Vasilić also talked about the conflict of interest in the case of public procurement in which Igor Brnabić (Prime Minister’s brother), who is in the management department of the company that got the job. The Prime Minister has stated that Vasilić should name those farmers and exact properties or step down. The President went a step further and said that she should be ashamed, called her a liar, and entangles her family by saying “let her daughter or her brother-in-law show their properties to see who is the corrupted criminal”. The President also called the journalists from the weekly newspaper *NIN* liars for just publishing the interview with Vasilić¹⁷³. The Republic Geodetic Authority, instead of providing the documentation that would prove the allegations are incorrect, accused Vasilić of playing politics¹⁷⁴.

The methods described above, used by the country’s highest officials against individuals, newspapers, and institutions represent the picture of the authoritarian state Serbia has become. Smear campaign are being normalized, and intimidation, threatening, public humiliation not just of political opponents, but also of individuals from a state institution for doing their job is a message that it is better to be quiet, not raise voice against any injustice or mistakes made by the ruling party. The attitude of the governing officials and their close associates is reflected in the democratization of the society. Democracy is also tolerance, dialog, acceptance of critique, this government and the President Vučić are narrowing the space for a critique and dialog. While attempting to control everything, they do not shy away from methods that are not in line with common democratic practice.

Since Ana Brnabić was elected for the role of Prime Minister only one meeting with the Council was held where they discussed systematic corruption and possible ways to minimize

¹⁷¹ See N1 (2015): Milenović: Napad je opomena, voleli bi da Savet ne postoji.

¹⁷² See Đaković – Nikolić, Tanja (2020): U toku je sistemska pljačka. In: *NIN*.

¹⁷³ Nešić, Nenad (2020): Vasilić zbog "brata" na udaru vrha vlasti, za N1 kaže – nema snage da odgovara. In: *N1*.

¹⁷⁴ See *Ibid*.

it. The Council requested a meeting several times in order to warn the Prime Minister about the constant increase in systematic corruption, however, she didn't have time to meet. All this time, the government, starting with the Prime Minister, all the way to the President, didn't show any interest to fight corruption. The fact that the Council handed over around 40 reports which tackle corruption to the government and that they never received any feedback speaks in favor of the governments' lack of will and interest in anything but to cover up the cases of corruption the Council is writing about¹⁷⁵. In 2017 the Government chose two new members, none of which the members of the Council suggested¹⁷⁶. According to Vasilić, the ones chosen were or still are members of the progressive party with a goal to prevent or hinder the fight against corruption. The authorities intend to shut down the Council, or in other words make it meaningless because the decision to hire these two members is just the beginning of the appointment of people under the control of the Government¹⁷⁷.

Another statement which came from the deputy Prime Minister raised concerns about the future of the Council: "procedure will be initiated to review the work of the Council in the past few years, the results of work, manner, criteria, and quality of reports, as well as the way of making recommendations, in order to reform this body and hire experts and professionals who will help the government to be more successful and efficient"¹⁷⁸. Vasilić has no doubts that the only background for such action is their determination to fight corruption, regardless if members of the current regime are involved or not: "the authorities or organizations close to it are involved in every serious case of corruption and that is why they are obstructing us"¹⁷⁹.

"Uninfluenced work of institutions that control the work of state authorities and protect civil rights is everywhere, even in Serbia, vital for establishing the responsibility of the governments, protecting the rights and interests of citizens and strengthening the rule of law"¹⁸⁰. In Serbia, the trend is worrying, instead of protecting institutions and enabling them to work independently, the state itself attacks and collapses the system from within. Weakened institutions that do not function and exist pro forma are in fact the embodiment of a new autocratic order that is based on democratic institutions but not respect its own procedures and laws. Power is in the hands of several individuals; in the case of Serbia, it is largely exclusively held by the President Vučić. Rhetoric's of the ruling elite and the chance it gives to the tabloids and TV

¹⁷⁵ Perović, Velimir (2020): "Postoji sumnja da je i Vučić korumpiran" Jelisaveta Vasilić, članica Saveta za borbu protiv korupcije. In: Direktno.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ See Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Beta (2020): Savet za borbu protiv korupcije: Da li Zorana Mihajlović najavljuje obustavu rada Saveta. In: Danas,

¹⁷⁹ NIN (2020): Anti-Corruption Council member warns of systemic corruption. In: N1.

¹⁸⁰ Commissioner for information of public importance and personal data protection (2011): Press release,

channels close to the government to carry out orchestrated attacks without being sanctioned, has a devastating effect on public communication, freedoms and democracy. To this, we add the lack of any chance that the person who is attacked by the governing elites and its media to present or defend their view on the subject. There is an absolute singularity of opinion in this context, hence the views are being deprived of a pluralistic approach which could enable them to take rational decisions. The consequence is a manipulated and distorted image of reality.

There are a few key problems that together with domestic institutes, international organizations and the European Union, the Strategy and the reports of the Anti-Corruption Council are identifying. In the sections below we will discuss them in detail.

4.3.2 Discussion of the key findings

In this section and 5 Tabloidization: From print tabloids via tabloidized TV stations to tabloidization of the state we discuss main findings of the Anti-Corruption Council, which include:

1. Non-transparency of media ownership
2. Negative economic influence of the state institutions on the work of media
3. Public interest and public broadcaster *RTS*
4. Censorship & self-censorship
5. Tabloidization

Findings 1 – 4 are discussed next. Finding 5 Tabloidization is section 5 in detail.

4.3.2.1 Non-transparency of media ownership

“By answering who owns the media we also answer the question of who holds the reins of power”¹⁸¹. In Serbia, it is not easy to find out who the real owner of a few influential media is. In addition, even known owner’s incorruptibility and the ability to decide independently about the course of the media is jeopardized by for example high tax debts, state subsidies etc.

European Commission’s report from 2014 clearly states that continues lack of transparency concerning media ownership as well as sources of media advertising and funding, is followed by increasing tendencies of censorship and self-censorship in the media, which we will also tackle in the sections below¹⁸².

Anti-Corruption Council dedicated space in two of its reports about media sector to the ownership structure. According to the report of the Council in 2011, transparency of media ownership, from analyzed 30 media, 18 had nontransparent ownership. In the second report

¹⁸¹ Hrvatin, B. Sandra/Petković, Brankica et al. (2004): Media ownership: impact on media independence and pluralism in Slovenia and other post-socialist European countries. P.10.

¹⁸² See European Commission (2014): Progress Report on Serbia. P.13.

from February 2015, 50 media outlets were analyzed, and the results are following: 23 media have fully transparent ownership, whereas 14 media have fully untransparent ownership, 13 media have formally transparent ownership but in public another private or legal entity is perceived as a true owner¹⁸³. Another founding of the Council in this respect is that majority of media where owners are companies established abroad, it is practically impossible to determine the real owner¹⁸⁴. Real owner is usually hidden behind a chain of companies, which usually has a goal of hiding identity of the real owner and his business from become transparent for the public eye, possibility to attract funds from nontransparent sources etc.¹⁸⁵. One such example is also a tabloid *Press*, which we mention later.

Reporters without Borders and local *BIRN* branch in Serbia analyzed media ownership in a joint project in 2017 and updated the database in 2019¹⁸⁶. The study covered 44 media outlets out of which 10 television outlets, 10 radio, 14 print editions and 10 online outlets¹⁸⁷. In 70% of cases data was publicly available, i.e. traceable in public records. 18.18% of outlets were actively transparent and in 11.82% of cases ownership was not transparent – data was deemed unavailable¹⁸⁸.

One of the most concerning results is the audience concentration which reveals that the top four owners on television market reach an audience of almost two thirds of the viewers (62%). An equally high concentration can be observed in printed press, where the top four owners have a combined readership of 63 percent. Regarding radio concentration, more than half of the audience (51%) is attributed to the four market leaders. Next result concerns cross-media concentration of the audio-visual print and online sectors, which is, according to the study very high¹⁸⁹. *BIRN* and Reporters without Boarders rightly concluded that this poses a high risk to media pluralism in the country¹⁹⁰.

4.3.2.2 Negative economic influence of the state institutions on the work of media Financing via state owned institutions

According to the third report of the Anti-Corruption Council that tackles media issues, one big problem is on the media scene in Serbia is the influence of the state through its

¹⁸³ See Anti- Corruption Council of the Government of the Republic of Serbia (2011): Report on Pressures on and Control of Media in Serbia. P.4-6

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ BIRN (2019): Updated Serbian Media Ownership Monitor Database Presented.

¹⁸⁷ Media ownership monitor Serbia (2019): Indicators of Risks to Media Pluralism.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Media ownership monitor Serbia (2019): Serbia.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

companies on the media market in terms of economic pressure and consequently media editorial policy. This report is covering the period between 2011 and 2014¹⁹¹.

One of the key outcome of this analysis is the estimation of the share of the state (here including agencies, local level, state owned companies, etc.) in the media funding and the Council came to the estimated amount of 840m Euros on the country level. Only media buying market per year does not exceed 160m Euros, so the conclusion is that the public sector is the biggest player on the media-buying and the media market in general¹⁹². This clearly indicates that the media sector is vastly dependent on the state institutions and state-owned companies¹⁹³. The report also shows how the public sector institutions circumvent the procedures, simulate transparency and competitiveness, and in fact, high officials have the discretionary right to decide on the destiny of the media by deciding who will get the state jobs. The consequence of such environment is the fact that the media are brought to the situation to agree with state institutions not to publish any negative articles before their approval¹⁹⁴. This further leads to the non-existent analytical texts in the media about the state institutions and its representatives¹⁹⁵.

Former editor in chief of *Kurir*¹⁹⁶ Femić explained that the media advertising is one of the tools for the ruling parties to silence the media. He describes it on his own example. After publishing a front page criticizing the Serbian government's decision to forgive a 22m Euros debt of the Air Serbia, a national airline jointly owned by the state of Serbia and Etihad Airways, that same day three big advertisers withdrew the ads¹⁹⁷.

¹⁹¹ See Anti-Corruption Council of the Government of the Republic of Serbia (2015): Report on the Possible Impact of Public Sector Institutions on Media through Financing of Advertising and Marketing Services. The report is based on information obtained by the Anti-Corruption Council from 124 state bodies, organizations, funds, public companies, companies with majority state capital, as well as local municipalities on marketing services, advertising, PR services, promotional and media campaign services, services development and maintenance of websites, sponsorships, donations and business-technical cooperation with the media.

¹⁹² Martinović, Iva (2015): Savet za borbu protiv korupcije: Milioni za državni marketing. In: Radio Slobodna Evropa.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ For example, Public Utility Company City Heating Plant Niš concluded contracts which demand from the media following: "...to affirmatively present primary activities of the company during the entire duration of the contract; not to publish any negative information regarding the company, before consulting with the company on their stand;..." See Anti-Corruption Council of the Government of the Republic of Serbia (2015): Report on the Possible Impact of Public Sector Institutions on Media, through Financing of Advertising and Marketing Services. P.58.

¹⁹⁶ Back in 2018, *Kurir* was critically reporting about Aleksandar Vučić and the government which changed overnight, when the owner was changed.

¹⁹⁷ See BIRN (2018): Under pressure: Serbian media reporting on organized crime and corruption. P19.

Tax and other inspections vs. tax exemptions

Report from February 2015 of the Anti-Corruption Council is tackling the problem of the tax debt¹⁹⁸. According to the Council's findings, the criteria are not the same for all taxpayers and that the practice showed that in some cases, accounts of a small tax debtor were blocked, while on the other side, large tax debts are being tolerated. There is a clear relationship between the media close to the government, which in by the rule have privileged status in comparison to the media who often criticize the government, which belong to the first mentioned group¹⁹⁹.

The report is analyzing numerous media outlets, we will illustrate only a few here. For instance, printing company *Borba* is a huge tax debtor and in the correspondence with the Council, they did not deny it. Their answer to the question why the debt was still unpaid, was that they are following the recommendation of the Prime Minister Vučić²⁰⁰.

One of the TV stations that openly support Vučić, *TV Pink* was granted more than 10m Euros in public loans in just 3 years 2013-2017, despite having a title of one of the largest tax debtors in Serbia²⁰¹. One local television, *Lastavica*, in ownership of Bratislav Gašić, highly positioned in the SNS hierarchy and Director of BIA, had her license revoked after failing to pay the fees. However, laws were put aside, and this local TV station continues broadcasting normally, in addition, later over 100.000 Euros were dropped²⁰².

While on one side, media that favors the government is enjoying privileged position, critical media are struggling with frequent tax and other inspections. Few media outlets went public accusing state inspections to abuse their power in order to discipline the media. One of such allegations that have strong evidence are two cases mentioned in the Freedom House report for 2017, one case is *Vranjanske novine* and the second one Adria Media Group (tabloid *Kurir*). In Serbia, the journalists "face arbitrary tax investigations, choked-off advertising revenue, and outright intimidation, including personal smears splashed across the pages of government-allied newspapers."²⁰³ Transparency Serbia conducted a research about the inspections in Serbia and if there is any abuse for the purpose of pressuring the media²⁰⁴. In this report, also a case of *Juzne vesti* is analyzed. Transparency Serbia conclusion of this case is that "such gross errors

¹⁹⁸ See Anti-Corruption Council of the Government of the Republic of Serbia (2015): Izveštaj o vlasničkoj strukturi i kontroli medija u Srbiji.

¹⁹⁹ Peščanik (2015): The new censorship.

²⁰⁰ Anti-Corruption Council of the Government of the Republic of Serbia (2015): Izveštaj o vlasničkoj strukturi i kontroli medija u Srbiji. P.152.

²⁰¹ Milivojević, Anđela (2018): Pink extended loan by AOFI again.

²⁰² O'Toole, Shannon (2017): A Cry for Help from Serbia's Independent Media. In: Freedom House.

²⁰³ O'Toole, Shannon (2017): A Cry for Help from Serbia's Independent Media. In: Freedom House.

²⁰⁴ See Transparency Serbia (2018): Inspekcije i mediji - nalazi istraživanja.

in the interpretation of regulations and logical reasoning, as well as the previous long-term control of this media, which has a critical attitude towards the actions of the authorities, cannot be considered accidental, but are part of the pressure on the media”²⁰⁵.

A very unusual investigation of the Anti-Money Laundering (AML) Unit (under Ministry of Finance) took place in summer 2020. Banks of 20 individuals and 37 NGO organizations were asked to provide transaction details for a period from January 2019 as a part of an investigation about potential money laundering or terrorism financing. Knowing that the Minister of Finance, ex Mayor of Belgrade was himself investigated by investigative journalists who also found few offshore companies he failed to report as well as more than 20 apartments on Bulgarian coast²⁰⁶, many had doubts about the motive of such AML investigation. In addition to the subjects of the investigation also international actors condemned such examination. Amnesty International stated: “the targeting of journalists and NGOs on absurd allegations of money laundering and financing terror is a blatant act of intimidation and the latest in an ongoing campaign by Serbian authorities to silence critics”²⁰⁷. One of Freedom House managers said on this issue: “By abusing the anti-money-laundering mechanism to intimidate civil society, the Serbian authorities show clear disregard for their own commitment to eradicating corruption”²⁰⁸.

Role of Telekom Serbia in suppressing media freedom

Telekom Serbia is a telecommunication joint-stock company in which the state i.e. Serbian citizens hold majority of ownership. Telecom is active in a few areas such as internet banking, cable operating network, telecommunication, internet providing. Although, there were speculations that this company will also be privatized in 2015, a different strategy was chosen – to grow! This growth of Telekom is connected to transaction that are, according to many experts in this field, unfavorable for Telekom. Some of examples of such transactions is the purchase of Adria Media Group or launch of the *Euronews Serbia* channel, and the agreement with Telenor²⁰⁹. These transactions allowed Telekom to fulfill its strategic goal and strengthen its position as well as the position of the pro-government media in the media system. Cable TV stations *NI* and *NovaS* are not distributed via Telecom channels, although this was a case with *NI* (*NovaS* was established in the meantime) until 2019, when the contract between United

²⁰⁵ Živanović, Katarina (2018): Cinična izjava premijerke Brnabić. In: Danas.

²⁰⁶ See KRIK (2019): Slučaj 24 stana: banka i država oduzele 6 apartmana u Bugarskoj.

²⁰⁷ Amnesty International (2020): Serbia: Targeting of journalists and NGOs a blatant act of intimidation.

²⁰⁸ Nešić, Milan (2020): Serbia Turns the Tables, Investigates the Investigative Journalists. In: Voice of America,

²⁰⁹ See Obradović, Vukašin (2021): Serbia: the battle for the TV market. In: Osservatorio balcani e caucaso transeuropa.

Media and Telecom expired²¹⁰. Unwillingness of Telecom to prolong the contract caused a round of questions and public dissatisfaction. Telecom was accused of serving as tool of the government to silence the media that are critically reporting about the current government. Despite the raised issue in the public, there is still no change in this respect. Owner of *NI* and *NovaS* is United Media which also owns a cable operator SBB. The latest developments in this “war” between SBB and Telekom are even more obviously directing to an unfair market game with a questionable goal. Namely, Telekom is about to enter a cooperation with Telenor, in ownership of the Czech businessman Petr Kellner and one internal document leaked to public with the following content:

*“This [agreement] allows [us] to **push SBB out of the market**, it allows Telekom to consolidate its leading position as a retail fixed broadband internet service provider, as well as to generate a large turnover as a wholesale service provider. As far as our contents, i.e. our television channel are concerned, since the use of our infrastructure also means the possibility to use our contents, [the agreement] will allow our media contents to prevail over those produced by channels controlled by United Media. **Therefore, the above-mentioned agreement will put an end to United Media’s and SBB’s activities in Serbia**”. This document is signed by the general Director of Telecom, Lučić²¹¹.*

Current split of share on telecommunications market looks like following: United Group holds 46,1% whereas Telekom possesses 42,4%²¹². This issue has a continuation in a lawsuit in which Telenor accused United Group (*NI* and *NovaS*) of a media campaign against the Telekom-Telenor deal and demanded a million Euro for the caused damage. The lawsuit claims that *NI* published false information about Telenor, especially concerning the deal with the state-controlled telecommunication company Telecom as part of a smear campaign which imposed serious damage on Telenor²¹³.

BIRN and Reporters without Borders view the dispute between United Group and Telekom as “attempt by the state to reduce the influence of the owner of one of the few private television stations which has a critical attitude towards the current government”²¹⁴. They also remind that the TV station *NI*, since the beginning, has been a “target for attacks by the highest

²¹⁰ See Radio Slobodna Evropa (2020): Telekom Srbija traži da besplatno emituje N1 dok traju pregovori.

²¹¹ Own translation

²¹² Obradović, Vukašin (2021): Serbia: the battle for the TV market. In: Osservatorio balcani e caucaso transeuropa.

²¹³ OBC Transeuropa (2021): Telekom, Telenor suing journalists to intimidate them, OBC Transeuropa says. In: N1.

²¹⁴ Media ownership monitor Serbia (2019): Concentration of Ownership in the Field of Cable Providers

state officials and pro-government media which refer to it as being 'American', insinuating in this way that it works for foreign interests rather than the public interest"²¹⁵.

4.3.2.3 Public interest and public broadcaster RTS

In the theoretical part, we discussed the importance of the public sphere, free press, and its influence on the establishment and the degree of democracy in a society. The formation of public opinion requires public reasoning and assumes a free press as a key institution of the public sphere.

The Law on Public Service Broadcasting in Article 7 prescribes "the public interest realized by the public service broadcaster"²¹⁶. The Law on Public Information and Media defines the public interest. Furthermore, it summarizes the right of the public to be informed about the issues of importance to the citizens, which is achieved through the media. Therefore, the media exist for the sake of the public. Their basic role is to provide citizens with truthful, timely, and diverse information. Everyone has the right to free, complete and truthful information. The state, through institutions and laws, guarantees freedom of media and press. In, there are two public broadcasters *RTS* (Radio Television Serbia) and *RTV* (Radio Television Vojvodina), which are financed by the citizens in order to report in their best interest. The *RTS* is supposed to report even on the topics that other media are not interested in because it has a contract with the public which implies the right of the public to be informed²¹⁷.

RTS journalist Olivera Kovacević stated that the *RTS* was always with the government and it was a picture of the current political situation and the current government. In the same interview, she also added that her socio-political talk show will not be broadcasted since she chose to continue working for *RTS* but in the entertainment area. The reason is the fact that work in an information program comes with too many obstacles than she is used to. Kovacević commented on the situation in the media by saying that the media are in a bad position, that there is more propaganda than reports, there are more and more lies, and that there are more insults than decent behavior²¹⁸. Real life is not shown on television, only life through the lenses of a small number of politicians and economic elite²¹⁹.

In support of the fact that *RTS* does not understand the public interest and that the real life is being suppressed at the cost of the bright reality of minor elite illustrates the response to the hunger strike of the opposition leader Obradović, who demanded 60 minutes on *RTS* in a

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Đurić, Rade/Dobrilović, Jasmina (2019): Protection of public interest and media pluralism in Serbia. P.4.

²¹⁷ See PG Mreža (2020): Informisanje u interesu javnosti. 6:40 – 7:19.

²¹⁸ See FoNet (2019): Kovačević: RTS uvek liči na aktuelnu vlast, nova sezona bez "Da, možda ne". In: N1.

²¹⁹ See Kovačev, Nataša (2020): Analiza: Mediji u Srbiji "u muškim cipelama", a javni interes nije u fokusu. In: N1.

live program. Since the opposition was virtually off the radar of all televisions with a national coverage, Obradović resorted to a radical measure - a hunger strike. One part of the answer concerning their understanding of the role in society and for society is the following: “If the Serbian Radio and Television agreed to your request, this precedent could become the rule tomorrow because a single mother whose are children hungry and barefoot, a student who fails the same exam for the fifth time, a football player who missed a penalty, a farmer whose harvest destroyed the harvest, a party that cannot pass the electoral threshold”²²⁰. *RTS* seems to have forgotten that single mothers, poor children and farmers are part of society that pays a monthly fee which shall enable *RTS* to report in their i.e. public interest. The *RTS* statement gives out the impression as it was written in the headquarters of a political party, because the wording was until now not characteristic for *RTS*²²¹.

The fact that journalists give up on their shows and move to entertainment because they cannot work freely and independently is an alarming sign. “There is a strong matrix of negative public discourse, behind which stand forces that base their position in society on that discourse and do not want to change it”²²². The level of control and influence from the President and governing elites was not remembered since the period of the nineties.

The objectivity of the public broadcaster was criticized many times by many different actors. The academic community even gathered 140 of its members around the idea to submit the request for a change of editorial policy of the *RTS*. Like many petitions, protests, and requests coming from the academic and civil sector, this request gave no results.²²³

The massive protest happening in Belgrade and many other cities across Serbia were barely mentioned in the *RTS* program. Interestingly enough, at the same time, there were protests in France and *RTS* did a quality report on these protests but on the ones happening at their doorstep, they decided to turn a blind eye. There was no TV debate where organizers or leaders of the opposition could come and express their concerns, reasons for protesting, or debate with the members of the ruling party about burning issues in the society. The opposition and representatives of academics and the NGO sector who speak openly about problems in the society were never invited to *RTS* or any other TV with national coverage. The public was not adequately informed even when the students blocked the Rectorate, demanding that the University

²²⁰ *RTS* (2020): Odgovor *RTS*-a Bošku Obradoviću: Podržavamo vaš zahtev tužilaštvu. In: UNS.

²²¹ See N1(2020): Pavićević: Odustajanje od štrajka glađu ne bi bio poraz, odgovor *RTS*-a surovost.

²²² Peščanik (2017): Mediji pod opsadom.

²²³ See FoNet/Danas Online (2020): Grupa doktora nauka predala zahtev za promenu uređivačke politike *RTS*. In: Danas.

declare itself on Siniša Mali's doctorate. Even when it was reporting, *RTS* put the statements made by the organizers of the blockade in the wrong context²²⁴.

One of the examples of a problem that concerns all citizens of Serbia is air pollution. Although few cities in Serbia were on the top lists of most polluted cities in the world, media with national coverage did not investigate or report on this issue. *RTS* did report, but with many weeks of delay, and only after the urgent meeting in the government²²⁵. Since the state subsidized a few factories that pollute the environment significantly, it is clear that bringing this issue to the public doesn't go in favor of the current regime, however, a problem of this magnitude should not be hushed up for the sake of any government. The health of the entire population is at stake.

Lazar Ristovski, an actor and film director, also confirmed in an interview that Vučić has mechanisms to influence decisions of *RTS*. Ristovski stated that during negotiations with *RTS* about his new movie, Vučić intervened and as a result, *RTS* financially supported Ristovski's movie. By stating that, Ristovski willingly or unwillingly, accused President Vučić of abuse of official position. Prosecutor's office ignored this incident²²⁶. Knowing the fact that Lazar Ristovski gave public support Vučić when he was running for the presidential elections, it becomes clear why the President was willing to put a nice word for his movie on *RTS* a year later²²⁷.

An example of biased reporting by *RTS* is a reportage showing the Minister of construction, transport, and infrastructure Zorana Mihajlović at the opening of a newly constructed bridge and smiling. What *RTS* did not convey to the citizens was a loud crowd shouting "Thieves, thieves!"²²⁸.

Two examples of interference by Vučić in the editorial policy were described by *RTS* journalist, who stayed anonymous, in the study of *BIRN* and Slavko Ćuruvija foundation. „Once, the journalist of *RTS* did not want to include in the report that the streets in one European city were blocked because of his [Vučić's] visit, explaining that this happened not only because of him, but that there is a summit and that streets are blocked due to all present politicians.“ Vučić replied: „Ok, if *RTS* does not want to release that, *Pink* will broadcast it“. As a consequence, this journalist could not report from the President's travel any more²²⁹.

²²⁴ See PG Mreža (2020): Informisanje u interesu javnosti. Transcript.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Transparency Serbia (2018): Investigate allegations of Ristovski against Vučić.

²²⁷ Nedeljnik (2017): Lazar Ristovski kao Miki i Bule: Vučić je borac, Beli je cirkus, ostali su mrsomudi.

²²⁸ See FoNet/Danas Online (2020): Grupa doktora nauka predala zahtev za promenu uređivačke politike RTS. In: Danas.

²²⁹ Đuričić, Aleksandar (2018): Aleksandar Vučić, predsednik novinara Srbije. In: Javno.

Same journalist from *RTS* also described another situation of interference by the President Vučić, this time into the editorial informative program *Dnevnik* (news - central information program). „...at the request of his [Vučić's] cabinet, each of his conversations with Putin in Moscow shall be subtitled, not synchronized" as was the practice until then. This changed when Vučić improved his language skills. "In that way, he wants to show how well he learned the Russian language". That is how it was broadcast on *RTS*, *Pink*, *Prva* and *O2* ", said the *RTS* journalist.²³⁰

Most recent event showed to what extent independence of *RTS* editorial policy is being challenged. The video went public in which, during a political interview with Ivica Dačić, ex Minister of Foreign Affairs and current Chairman of the National Assembly, while the audience was watching advertising, journalist asked Dačić about which topics he would like to talk and said that he can also mention Đilas. Dačić then said that he only mentioned Tadić and that Đilas is just an amateur²³¹.

According to an *RTS* journalist, the pressure on the news program of the public service was so great that almost all the editors were removed or took refuge in some other programs themselves²³².

According to the government's report in the document of the Strategy 2020, the causes of the unprofessional and biased reporting of the public broadcaster can be seen in the following facts:

- although contrary to the law, there is an existing financial dependence of the public broadcaster on the state budget.
- members of the management boards of public media services are elected and dismissed by REM, whose independence is considered debatable, and the existence of insufficient trust of one part of the public in REM's independence indirectly affects the confidence in the independence of board members.
- trust in the election of the director when electing the Board (although the election procedure is formally conducted by law);
- there are no guarantees of the editor's independence from the governing body;
- there are not enough mechanisms to establish the accountability of public media services to the public²³³.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Nova.rs (2020): Dačić u studiju RTS za vreme reklama: Ko je bre Đilas? In: N1.

²³² See Đuričić, Aleksandar (2018): Aleksandar Vučić, predsednik novinara Srbije. In: Javno.

²³³ Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2020 to 2025 (Media Strategy). P.19.

To this list, we would add a general socio-economic environment in Serbia which enabled interference in the financial and editorial policy by the President Vučić and the highest government officials.

“Citizens are the ones who suffer consequences of the government pressure and biased media reporting because they are being blinded by the media”²³⁴. A citizen cannot have an opinion on many topics when there are no elements based on which he would have that opinion, information does not reach him. Depriving of basic information is a crime against your citizens. The role of the media is to provide citizens with truthful and diverse information on all important topics, as well as to enable the expression of different opinions and debate. Hence, only a well-informed citizen can be an active member of his community who makes quality decisions in the interest of the whole society. On the other hand, he adds, societies that do not have media that work in the public interest are considered unfree and undemocratic²³⁵.

Many university professors, members of journalistic associations are critical and pessimistic about the current situation in respect of the public broadcaster. In their view, information program of RTS is a “propaganda bulletin of the governing elites represents the reality of the public broadcast and the suppressed public interest in Serbia”²³⁶. Which implies that “we are financing our own media darkness”²³⁷.

4.3.2.4 Censorship & self-censorship

System in Serbia reveals quite a few features of the “new authoritarianism”, the system in which the ruling elite presents itself as a democratic, but in reality, they are working on oppression and destruction of any criticism²³⁸. In this context, all the above described mechanisms of pressuring the media have a unique consequence if we observe the media scene comprehensively: censorship, soft censorship or self-censorship depending on the type of media and its relationship with the government. Although very strict art of censorship is frequently seen in the last years, one example did find its path to the public.

An email in which colleagues of the Belgrade Airport are instructed not to display weekly newspapers *Nedeljnik*, *NIN* and *Vreme* and newspapers of similar content in the airport lounge and to immediately remove them if passengers leave one behind²³⁹. Knowing that these tree weeklies conduct their watchdog role towards the government, similar content could refer to all

²³⁴ PG Mreža (2020): Informisanje u interesu javnosti. Transcript

²³⁵ See PG Mreža (2020): Informisanje u interesu javnosti. Transcript

²³⁶ Sejdinović, Nedim (2020): Kako smo zaradili Vučića. In: Vreme.

²³⁷ N1 (2015): Milenović: Napad je opomena, voleli bi da Savet ne postoji.

²³⁸ Peščanik (2015): The new censorship.

²³⁹ Vučić, Marija (2018): Ćutanje Er Srbije o zabrani nedeljnika podgreva sumnje o cenzuri. In: Raskrinkavanje.

newspapers with a critical voice. It is worth mentioning here that the President's media advisor in the supervisory board of the airline²⁴⁰.

Soft censorship is hardly visible, it is subtle and indirect, but it proved to be very effective mechanism of media control that diminishes journalistic independence, restricts freedom of expression. Soft censorship stems from a non-transparent, uncontrolled, and unequal approach to state funds (which includes selective access to subsidies and advertising funds from state sources see above project co-financing), as well as the discretionary application of the regulatory framework (see above tax and other inspections vs. tax exemptions)²⁴¹.

Some scholars use the term “new censorship” and explains that censorship and self-censorship to be parts of the same package. Self-censorship can be seen as the best indicator of censorship. “It is a new censorship where the media products are not banned, the texts are not censored, where the people are not prevented to do their jobs directly. It is a whole system of bribery of the media, which is involving the media in the circle of institutions that have relatively easy access to a variety of social resources, from doctoral diplomas to access to funds, turning a blind eye to tax incentives, grant accessibility, access to desirable contracts.”²⁴²

Regardless of the terminology, is it *soft* or *new*, it is a reality in Serbian media outlets. Some media even had to close after long tradition due to the pressure of the governing elites of all types: tax inspections, financial pressures, smear campaigns, direct treats. One the latest examples is a weekly *Vranjske novine* which ceased publishing after 23 years because of intense political and economic pressures, including financial inspections allegedly aimed at compromising its finances²⁴³. Obradović, owner and editor in chief of *Vranjske* had a situation that one local criminal comes to him and says: “Does your daughter live in Belgrade? She could watch out when crossing the street, something could happen to her”, in addition Obradović received a warning via the messenger that his wife will be made redundant in her workplace²⁴⁴.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ BIRN (2016): Meka cenzura: Promene u medijskom sektoru – sa goreg na lošije. P.4.

²⁴² Peščanik (2015): The new censorship.

²⁴³ See IFJ (2017): Serbia: ‘Vranjske novine’ weekly closed following administrative harassment.

²⁴⁴ See Transparency Serbia (2018): Inspekcije i mediji - nalazi istraživanja. P.12.

5 Tabloidization: From print tabloids via tabloidized TV stations to tabloidization of the state

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an insight into practical daily functioning of print and TV media in Serbia. In addition, it discusses the influence of authoritarian government on the media in terms of its content, context, agenda, and the tone. We consider it important to illustrate the theoretical framework, as well as results of international evaluations (all showing authoritarian tendencies, see next chapter) with examples from the daily media and press life. As a continuation of the chapter 4, where we showed institutional and systematic attack on media freedoms, provided insights in the problems like the ownership transparency, good laws that serve the opposite of its purpose in the practice (project co-financing), institutions that serve the party instead of public interest (for example REM), this chapter is providing a deeper analysis of the increasing trend of the tabloidization issue. This issue was recognized by the Anti-Corruption Council already in 2015, as well as in annual report of the Protector of Citizens in 2012, in which he warrened about the “tabloidization” of the media, and already in 2013 in the same annual report it grew into the “tabloidization of the state”²⁴⁵. According to this report, two interrelated phenomena are specially worrying: “the pressure exerted on the media (media control) and leaking of confidential information and virtual transfer of institutional processes to privileged tabloid media”²⁴⁶.

Autocratic government has an extremely negative and devastating impact on the media and the media sphere. It leads to the fact that absolutely everything revolves around money and power, journalism vanishes from the public sphere as a superfluous factor, while only propaganda pillars of the SNS remain²⁴⁷. Values imposed by the tabloids: celebrities, nudity, anything-for-money, power, moved to the National Assembly and TV, so the MPs, who were once considered the best and most educated representatives of our society, today personify obedient individuals without identity. A kind of self-sustaining ecosystem has been created in which the only allowed actors are politicians in power, ‘analysts’ under government control or close to the ruling elite. Their role is to confirm and justify every government’s move, pro-

²⁴⁵ Protector of Citizens (2014): 2013 Annual report. P.10.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Pressing (2020): Gosti u Pressingu: Napadi na novinare imaju cilj da zastraše građane koji kritički misle. In: N1, 53-55.

government media, both, print and TV. which all together create a kind of own reality. Anyone who tries to contradict this artificially imposed reality is attacked by the whole system through the particular mechanisms we have described in subsequent section. The loudest ones end in a ruthless lynch matrix. “At this point, the boundary between an objective reality and a virtual one gets blurred”²⁴⁸.

We begin this section by briefly recapping the theory of “public sphere”. Next, we tackle phenomenon of media transition with respect to the commercial business and its strategic positioning in society as well as a shift in communication style. We look at the change of communication style in political life and its interdependence with the growing tabloidization of the media. This aims to provide a basis for an understanding of how and why tabloids were established, as well as what connected such style of reporting with a general state policy in Serbia. Subsequently, we look at examples of concrete mechanisms, which are used by the ruling elite through media. Finally, we sum up the chapter by concluding that tabloidization poses a threat to democracy in the way is currently developing in Serbia- tabloid press is above the law and is being used to manipulate the public. During this process, an interesting phenomenon occurs: the tabloidization of the state.

5.1.1 Tabloidization development in the “Public Sphere”

Following the development of Habermas’ “public sphere”, the media positioned itself in the center of political processes, shaping the public agenda and generating the “public sphere” that is mediated. Habermas recognizes the manipulative power of influence through media via official statements, speeches, declarations, which are made by the narrow circle of politicians, media, advertisers that in turn can be addressed to the wide public. However, these events are happening in narrow circles that do not realize the requirements of a public process, nor of a rational-critical debate. Consequently, the rational public sphere is endangered.

According to Habermas, commercialization of the press lead to its manipulative characteristic. “Ever since the marketing of the editorial section became interdependent with that of the advertising section, the press (until then an institution of private people insofar as they constituted a public) became an 'institution of certain participants in the public sphere in their capacity as private individuals; that is, it became the gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere’”²⁴⁹. In this chapter, we argue that the commercialization of the media is not a bad thing per se, but if a state does not control it, and provides adequate environment, it can lead to all the media belong to a small number of individuals which hold

²⁴⁸ Veljanovski, Rade/Štavljanin, Dragan (2017): The Belated and Bedeviled Media Transition in Serbia. P.68.

²⁴⁹ Habermas, Jürgen (1991): The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society. P.185.

power and manipulate public opinion. We also show how the government uses the commercialization, supports tabloidization and instrumentalizes this process for its own political benefits.

With media being a significant actor in the creation of public opinion and not just its facilitator, the rise of media influence in all societal spheres is notable. This trend of increased media influence can be defined as mediatization, which is a concept in media and communication studies. For the purpose of our research, we limit our analysis to the media influence on politics, i.e., their interconnection.

Scholars observed how mass media produced political content and affected political processes, and defined mediatized politics as “politics that has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media.”²⁵⁰

Other scholars viewed the same process from a different perspective. Politics and political communication also changed significantly under the influence of mediatization. This trend of growing media influence led to the transformation of politics but also to the creation of news skills among politicians to handle the changing media rules. Birkner analyzed the case of the former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt and concluded that “under certain historical circumstances, media-conscious politicians initiate the mediatization of politics, without submitting politics to the logic of the mass media”²⁵¹.

Implications of mediatized politics were reflected also in the way of communication i.e. language. What Habermas described as a private sphere was over time getting into the public one, hence the same private, personalized, simple communication reflected the new journalistic style of political communication at the expense of policies. In order to increase profit and sell more copies, journalists and editors resorted to the “spectacularization” of political discourse.²⁵² Interest groups formed around media (companies, political parties, government officials) influenced the “agenda shaping” power of the media to launch issues for public debate. Striving to come to a bigger number of readers and “create a plebiscitary follower mentality on the part

²⁵⁰ Mazzoleni, Gianpietro/Schulz, Winfried (1999): "Mediatization" of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy? P.250.

²⁵¹ Klačar, Bojan (2020): Analysis of Frame Messages in Political Advertising on Television in Serbia Parliamentary Campaigns from 2000 to 2016. P.47. In: Birkner, Thomas (2015): Mediatization of politics: The case of the former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt. *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 30(4) 454–469, P.455.

²⁵² Mazzoleni, Gianpietro (2014): Mediatization and Political Populism. P.43.

of a mediated public”²⁵³ political speeches became oversimplified with the “sound-bite” effect and the “winnowing”²⁵⁴.

Some scholars bring up the terms of “politainment”, “infotainment”, “Americanization” or “mediocracy” aiming to define one aspect of the media transition or media influence on other spheres. These partially overlapping concepts aim to explain simplification of vocabulary commonly used in media’s political arena, as well as its personification and sensationalism²⁵⁵. For the purpose of our study, we will stick to the term tabloidization, since it best describes the direction media sphere in Serbia is heading. The aforementioned tendencies influenced also the evolution of the term tabloidization from a small format press to a term describing a mutation of media communication.

Barnett discusses three tabloidization trends. The first one is related to the downsizing of the serious material (his example is foreign news coverage in the US that experienced a reduction by 42 percent on the three major networks between 1988 and 1996, and a sad recognition by the senior executives present that “time and money dictates we must bypass some stories” because that is what the viewers want). Instead of challenging stories, like economic or social life, there is an increase of news based on an individual personal life of celebrities, emotions, entertainment, showbusiness, scandal news and TV coverage and similar²⁵⁶.

The second argument is dealing with the nature of the material, where a text goes through a few iterations to become BLT (bright, light and trite) in order to make the article more populist²⁵⁷.

Barnett’s third argument is based on the fact that, although the quantity of serious coverage did not change, and it remains uncorrupted in nature, this type of stories and programs are given less and less importance. Front pages and peak-time programs are devoted to more entertaining or more “human interest” stories in order not to push back potential readers or viewers. Barnett emphasizes that serious and analytical stories are still being covered but are significantly marginalized²⁵⁸.

The tabloidization of journalism in Serbia and hence of Serbian society takes a prominent place in an analysis of the media sector in Serbia as well as in this thesis. Serbian tabloids,

²⁵³ Habermas, Jürgen (1991): *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. P.247.

²⁵⁴ Mazzoleni, Gianpietro (2014): *Mediatization and Political Populism* P.43.

²⁵⁵ Cretu, Florina (2013): *Just how tabloidized is tabloid press?* P.127

²⁵⁶ Barnett, Steven (1998): *Dumbing Down or Reaching Out: Is It Tabloidisation wot done it?* P.76

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.* P.77.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.* P.79.

without an exception, are on a mission to trivialize politics. Their first focus is political life where traditionally ‘serious’ topics are treated in a tabloid way²⁵⁹.

5.2 Tabloidization of journalism in Serbia

Comparably to the world’s trends, in Serbia, tabloids are run exclusively by profit and power, and there is no public sphere or freedom of speech and democracy are very limited. Therefore, the spread of the influence of tabloidization into the sphere of political life directly threatens democracy.

According to the research of media observatory report on Serbia, the journalism in Serbia is split by three ideologies: one group observes the media as guardians of public interest, controllers of the government that should be free from personal, political or corporate agendas; the second group perceives media as important agents of the state- and nation-building. The third group, recently emerging are co-called “commercial journalists” that perceive media as a business with a unique goal: to be profitable. In this profit-chasing battle, journalists feel little responsibility for the social consequences of violations of ethical rules of the profession, instead, they consider them useless anyway²⁶⁰.

The change of the regime in 2000 also brought changes to the media framework, media were not directly controlled by the government like during Milošević’s rule. The wave of privatization and liberalization of the market was also replicated on the media scene. This chance was only used by the tabloid press, which were the only new newspaper established since the democratic changes.

5.2.1 The cases of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić and Oliver Ivanović

The enormous power of the tabloid press became obvious when *Nacional* and *Identitet* started a campaign against Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić²⁶¹. These tabloids were found to be financed by Zemun Criminal Gang (Zemunski Klan) and individuals that are convicted of the assassination of the Prime Minister in 2003²⁶². The campaign of these tabloids against the Prime Minister had a goal of his personal discreditation, to present him as a criminal, which was supposed to lead to the acceptance of his murder²⁶³. Although, during the action Sabre (Sablja), immediately after the Prime Minister’s assassination, these tabloids were shot down. However,

²⁵⁹ See Milivojević, Snježana (2007): Tabloidizacija dnevne štampe u Srbiji. In: Mediacentar online.

²⁶⁰ See Matić, Jovanka (2014): Flash report 3: Serbia; Serbian Journalism: A Profession in Crisis. In: South East European Media observatory.

²⁶¹ See Biblioteka Svedočanstva (2006): Zoran Đinđić: Etika Odgovornosti: zbornik radova. P.267.

²⁶² See Insajder (2020): Tačka 2. Transcript.

²⁶³ See Insajder (2020): Tačka 1. Transcript.

new ones were established. A campaign against the Prime Minister Đinđić continued by further satanizing and criminalizing all those who were Đinđić's associates²⁶⁴.

Prime Minister Đinđić was not the only one who suffered a smear campaign before being murdered. In many aspects different and incomparable, but still with the same blueprint, the assassination of Oliver Ivanović has been announced. Oliver was a leader of a civic initiative from Kosovo and Metohija who was assassinated in January 2018. The only difference was that before his murder, not only tabloid press was involved in an organized smear campaign but also TV station with national coverage including TV *Pink* and TV *Most* (TV Bridge). The latter is a television channel from Kosovo and Metohija and it belongs to a public company *Mreža Most* (Network Bridge), which is financed by all Serbian citizens. As such, it has a special political and public significance as the TV stations under government control were the frontrunners in the smear campaign against Oliver's integrity. Based on this we see that methods used by criminals in the nineties and after the democratic changes have evolved into something more powerful: from attacks placed through tabloids with unknown ownership structure and source of funds to the TV station with national coverage, that a) has bigger visibility and b) is more credible source of information. This negative campaign was reflected in a pre-election video that started during the campaign for the local elections in Kosovska Mitrovica. The video labeled Ivanović as a traitor of all Serbs and a person with Albanian ties²⁶⁵. At the beginning of the broadcast of this tv spot, Ivanović objected to it and said that the video was paid for by the *Srpska Lista* (Serbian List), which otherwise acts as a branch of the Serbian Progressive Party in Kosovo and Metohija because he did not want to cooperate with them²⁶⁶. Many SNS officials, including Vučić, publicly accused Oliver of working against the interests of Serbian people on Kosovo and Metohija. Although, Oliver already identified *Srpska Lista* (Serbian List), as originator of the video, institutions did not react. After the murder of Ivanović and even today, more than three years later, the person who produced and ordered broadcast of the video is not known to the public. The government of Serbia accuses Kosovo institutions of not being able to conduct an appropriate investigation and Kosovo, on the other side accuses Serbia of not cooperating on this issue because the location of the murder was Severna Mitrovica, in a part of the city where Serbs live²⁶⁷.

²⁶⁴ Insajder (2016): Insajder bez ograničenja - Zamena teza s predumišljajem. 27:03 – 28:01.

²⁶⁵ See Pink International Company (2017): Spot o Oliveru Ivanoviću.

²⁶⁶ See Danas (2017): NUNS: Pink protiv Olivera Ivanovića.

²⁶⁷ See RTS (2020): Hiljadu dana od ubistva Olivera Ivanovića.

5.2.2 The Single-purpose newspapers

The dynamics of opening and closings of tabloids (companies) with the same owners were a direct consequence of an unregulated market which allowed this practice. This presented a way out for the owner when the tabloid serves its purpose, as before any elections, or in case someone decides to sue the tabloid for slander. Usual practice is to shut down the existing and establish a new company with the same journalists and address, but with a different name. Due to unknown sources of funds, and because their price was low and affordable, these tabloids would rapidly become bestsellers on the market. Nobody has ever suffered any legal consequences or paid fines for such actions. Only in 2014, the media register was established allowing for tracing of all media and their owners and enabling legal actions in case of slander.

Unfortunately, the legislation only enabled the aforementioned practice to continue by imposing symbolic fines which can be easily covered from the income of the newspaper. On top of this, adding the duration of the process, we can see that the satisfaction for the victim would usually come too late and it would have no effect on the work of the newspaper. The effect on the public sphere, the society and consumers of the tabloids is neglectable because even in rare cases when the verdict is published in a tabloid, in small font so that the effect of a bombastic headline discrediting a person in relation to a public apology or published verdict is incomparable. The average reader remembers insults and slander and probably never reads a verdict written in thick lines. Sometimes, additional level of spinning the public is achieved by labeling the judges as Đilas' mercenary.

5.2.3 The 'controlled chaos'

Veljanovski and Štavljanin argue that the media scene in Serbia is in a state of 'controlled chaos' from which two negative trends can be observed. The first one is comparable to a global trend and it relates to the financial stability of the commercial media which "pander to the lowest instincts aimed at luring consumers"²⁶⁸. The second one is a country-specific trend that raises concerns about the tabloidization of the whole society, since such tabloid press covers not only celebrities, but also heavily focuses on the political sphere²⁶⁹. According to their research, the consequence of the increased number of TV channels and media lead to the fragmentation of the audience which in turn results in undermined cohesion of the public sphere and facilitated policy of division. This division is visible among journalists as well as among society. The Ipsos study from 2018, in which 93% of respondents said that Serbia is a *very* or

²⁶⁸ Veljanovski, Rade/Štavljanin, Dragan (2017): The Belated and Bedeviled Media Transition in Serbia. P.66.

²⁶⁹ Veljanovski, Rade/Štavljanin, Dragan (2017): The Belated and Bedeviled Media Transition in Serbia. P.66.

fairly divided society supports this argument²⁷⁰. Public officials, in the first line the President Vučić, with their statements deepen divisions by classifying the media into *theirs* and *ours*.

We witness a period of high-speed information exchange and availability, but the quality and the public understanding of these are following a reverse path. This vast amount of information aims to divert attention from important topics and affairs of the authorities and bury the attention of readers to the level that they are confused and do not know what is happening or what is about to happen next. In parallel, serious, challenging, and true information is suppressed by trivial, sensationalist, vulgar, and manipulative stories. Consequently, ignorance and apathy are more and more widespread in society in Serbia, and all these factors combined pose a threat to democracy.

5.2.4 The ‘uncontrolled chaos’

With the coming to power of the SNS, tabloidization gained a new level of influence on political life and society. The SNS is a party formed from a Serbian Radical Party that, from the beginning cultivates an anti-elite discourse, and as such feeds the tabloids with bombastic headlines, often using inappropriate language to mark the opponents. What is more, it even introduces this simplified, sensationalist, trivial language into its official speeches and political life in general. This enables and promotes growth of authoritarianism and the weakening of democracy in the country. The period from 2012, is characterized by an authoritarian style of governing the country by the subtle influence on loyal media rather than a strict censorship which is overlapping with increased tabloidization and the aim of the government to further control the public sphere. Freedom House also discussed in its report from 2019 the President’s bias towards certain media. They use the term *illiberal toolbox* which, in the case of Serbia consists of issue framing, agenda-setting in order to identify the “enemy”, but it also contains positive narrative building through the loyal media²⁷¹. This loyal media is in the print press almost exclusively tabloid.

In view of the experienced journalist, Aleksandar Vučić brought the media scene to its ‘perfection’ in terms of cruelty. He said that the “tabloids used to be court poodles, which now turned into pit bull terriers, that, on a daily basis bite you, tear you apart, act as a judge, jury and executioner”²⁷².

Besides pure propaganda and an increase of rating, tabloids are used by the governing elite also for a variety of other purposes. In the next section, we discuss a few of these

²⁷⁰ See IPSOS (2018): BBC Global Survey. A world divided?

²⁷¹ See Repucci, Sarah (2019): Freedom and the Media 2019. Media Freedom: A Downward Spiral. In: Freedom House.

²⁷² BIRN (2017): Dokumentarni film „Policija i mediji“.10:55- 11:30.

manipulation mechanisms, which have contributed the most to the forming of overall picture of the media scene and political system in Serbia.

5.3 Manipulation mechanisms in Serbian journalism

5.3.1 Agenda setting and issue framing

We tackled this phenomenon earlier in the thesis. It comes down to the fact that tabloids are so well sold that they set the agenda for all other media and thus for the general public. In Serbia, newspaper with the highest circulation is a tabloid called *Informer*. Unfortunately, a few quality newspapers that are still on the market do not reach its circulation even when combined²⁷³. It is also worth mentioning that editor in chief of *Informer* was also editor of *Press*, which was financed by Đilas and a controversial businessman Mišković. During the time of the democratic government rule it served for political, even internal party subterfuge. When Vučić came to power, Mišković publicly admitted that he had a share in *Press* and withdrew from the ownership. Tabloid *Press* vanished from the market after 48 hours. The main editor in chief, Vučićević continued doing the same job, just on the other side of the political playground - on the side of Vučić. Soon, it will have become the most loyal tabloid to the former Prime Minister and current President Vučić and the most popular daily newspaper. This fact is used by the governing elites to the extent that they practically decide what will be the main topics of this print newspaper. Together with what will be reported usually comes how it will be reported, and this is how we enter a different aspect of what is real. Issues are being framed in a way that suits the governing elites, regardless of their true background and public interest. Journalists are being sent to press conferences with pre-determined questions. There is no room for “negative surprises”.

The aforementioned example of a smear campaign before the association of Prime Minister Đinđić is also an example of agenda-setting by the tabloids. After a series of publications in the tabloids, also reputable newspapers started writing about and investigating the subject.

Most recent tactics involve war or coups d'état. During 2018 *Informer* and *Srpski Telegraph* have announced wars and conflicts on the cover 265 times. Serbia was “in war” with the “Ustaša” (denoting Croatian fascists) in 47 instances, and 30 times with the “Šiptars” (denoting Albanians)²⁷⁴.

²⁷³ See Vukotić, Manjo (2017): Zašto propadaju srpske novine? In: Vmedia.

²⁷⁴ Živanović, Katarina (2019): Koje su sve ratove najavljivali tabloidi u 2018. godini? In: Danas.

Recently, new communication trend is seen rising around public officials and institutions. Mediatization of the politics, politainment and a general simplification of the vocabulary in the arena of high politics is one of consequences of spreading tabloid influence on other spheres and its use in populist purposes. In contemporary Serbia, members of the progressive party are the ones setting these standards in the Parliament, as well as in the state institutions. A connection between the vocabulary of the MPs and tabloids is undeniable. There is a mechanism behind it, which exposes that this is not a natural evolution of communication but instead made on purpose. For example, in their speeches, MPs use not just inappropriate language, crosswords, sensationalist and rude vocabulary but also very often make false claims and allegations.

Currently, there is practically no opposition in the Serbian Parliament since the majority of them boycotted the elections in June 2020. In spite this, MPs are in a constant battle with an ‘enemy’.

In order to further support the argument of the agenda-setting by the ruling elite, as well as the adaption of the tabloid language and its infiltration into the daily life of Serbian Parliament, we analyze a few parliamentary sessions. The sessions are chosen randomly and presented in no particular order.

In a week when the number of deaths due to COVID-19 reached its peak in Serbia, MPs were talking about 619 million Euros that opposition leader Đilas allegedly stole from the state budget before 2012²⁷⁵. Interestingly enough, although this mantra with the millions that were stolen was highly popular in recent years, not even a single investigation by state institutions was conducted. There is enough evidence to believe that these types of stories are being used to distract from other important topics that were supposed to be on the agenda in the Parliament. That same week, there was a debate about another ‘enemy’ in the Parliament: the media. *Nova S* and *N1* were labeled as the “so-called independent” media and the “anti-Serbian media”, the “domestic traitor” and the “foreign mercenary”²⁷⁶. This rhetoric in the Parliament when media are labeled as enemy of the state is identical to the radical rhetoric that was most prominent during the 1990s which, combined with the weakening of the freedom of speech and an enhanced control justifiably raises concerns of one backsliding into the authoritarian system of the nineties, only without the civil war and international sanctions.

Although, the parliamentary sessions during the corona crisis around the World typically serve for a discussion about the measure to combat the spreading of the virus and

²⁷⁵ See N1 (2020): 7 na N1: “Rat protiv nevidljivog neprijatelja”. 7:00 – 9:10

²⁷⁶ See N1 (2020): 7 na N1: “Rat protiv nevidljivog neprijatelja”. 11:55 – 12:05

measures to help economy and society, Serbian Parliament had a slightly different role. These discussions usually take place behind the closed doors and the measures are announced, without a debate by the government. The root might be the fact that there is no opposition in the parliament, so any discussion that would take place would not be as fruitful. Very often, during the parliamentary sessions, beside constant campaign against the so called dissidents, members of the ruling party build a personality cult of Aleksandar Vučić: “On these televisions (*N1 and Nova S*), they are competing and bidding with how many bullets in the back President Vučić will be hit”²⁷⁷. or “We have a President who is not afraid of anything, the more you threaten him, the braver he is”²⁷⁸. Together with a construction of a cult of a leader, the issue about the alleged security threats to the President is being framed and presented as a main state issue and the top concern. Even in an expose of the Prime Minister Brnabić, one of the top priorities that were mentioned was security of the President Vučić. She urged state institutions to protect the safety of President Vučić “who has launched the war against the mafia” as well as to prove that “the state is stronger than the organized crime”²⁷⁹. Vučić, during his mandate as a Prime Minister and a President survived many alleged coups d'état that were announced by the members of his party and editor in chief of *Informer*²⁸⁰.

In order for tabloid stories about Vučić to gain value and significance, members of the Parliament from SNS began regularly introducing words of praise for the Prime Minister and now the President, regardless of the topic. Sometimes even the whole speech, for example, the debate about the budget, turns into praising the personality and contribution of Aleksandar Vučić. Such speeches often include the issues of the president's endangered safety, which are proven to be the best way to make exclusive and sensationalist headlines.

Cenzolovka conducted a research of front pages of 6 dailies (*Alo, Blic, Danas, Informer, Kurir i Večernje Novosti*) in 2016. Among other things they found that during 2016 Mr. Vučić was mentioned on every third front page²⁸¹. Prime Minister Vučić is the person that most often appeared on front pages, and in almost all cases, the context was either positive or neutral. It is usually done as follows: Vučić gives a comment on a certain topic or publishes positive news about Serbia. He is often presented as an unwavering leader who is endangered and fights against numerous enemies which want to overthrow him. At the same time, he has a role of a savior who has a solution to all problems. According to the research results, there is a complete

²⁷⁷ Ibid. 13:45 – 14:07

²⁷⁸ Ibid. 18:57 – 19:01

²⁷⁹ Bjelotomić, Snežana (2020): Six goals of Ana Brnabić's new government. In: Serbian monitor.

²⁸⁰ See Nikolić, Zoran B. (2015): Akcija „Državni udar“: Upotreba države i medija u proizvodnji straha u Srbiji. In: Cenzolovka,

²⁸¹ See Jahić, Dino (2017): Naslovnice dnevnih novina u Srbiji: Horror, strah, užas, kraj... In: Cenzolovka,

absence of any criticism, except for *Danas*, where the back than Prime Minister's moves are usually questioned by one of the opposition leaders or other interlocutors²⁸².

Agenda setting and issue framing are one of the most popular and frequently used mechanisms for control of the public sphere that is in use on a daily basis.

5.3.2 Disinformation

Disinformation is a real problem we face around the World. The High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation of the European Commission defined it as “false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit.”²⁸³ As such, disinformation is a serious problem that poses a threat to democracy in general.

The fact that there has been a debate at the EU level for many years now on how to approach this problem speaks to how dangerous it has become. In the years of the global pandemic, we could see daily examples of how much damage is caused by disinformation. This is only exacerbated when it comes from state officials, which is spreading with incredible speed in the age of information technologies and democracy. While the European administration is working on developing the best strategy that would target disinformation and on the other hand promote pluralism and freedom of the media, in Serbia the government is suppressing pluralism while actively working on the rise of disinformation. Although, according to the Serbian criminal law (Article 343), publishing incorrect information is a criminal offense for which the law prescribes a sentence of up to five years in prison, the tabloids spread such news several times a day, usually without any consequences²⁸⁴.

If we observe how MPs spread disinformation that is then over by the tabloids, we see a paradoxical situation in which the ones who are supposed to control the executive, instead produce disinformation to cover them up, serving as a starting point of many smear campaigns. Judiciary is turning a blind eye to this issue and so the circle is closed. Production and spread of disinformation is not only enabled, but also rewarded. “Disinformation is further pushed through spokespersons, PR consultants, interest and lobbying groups, political parties, in order to create “pseudo-event” and thus attract publicity”²⁸⁵. Then, the tabloids come to the scene which publish unconfirmed information and use sensationalist wording. Examples include

²⁸² See Ibid.

²⁸³ European Commission (2018): Final report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation. P.10.

²⁸⁴ See VOICE (2020): Veljko Milić: Srbija ima mehanizme za borbu protiv lažnih vesti, ali ih ne primenjuje adekvatno.

²⁸⁵ Štavljanin, Dragan (2013): Varljiva istina i objektivnost kao strateški ritual. P.34.

dragging targeted person “through the mud”. The tabloid frenzy and defamation amount to the “lynching” and hounding of opponents”²⁸⁶.

5.3.3 Discrediting and slandering

In this section we discuss discrediting and slandering campaigns as one of the key mechanisms used by the governing elites through the media. In particular, we focus on discrediting and slandering of: (i) *Political opponents*, (ii) *Journalists* and (iii) *Other actors* (artists, academics, NGOs, members of international community etc.).

Attacks on political opponents have been present for a long time in Serbia and worldwide. However, attacks on journalists and media indicates a deeper level of control of institutions, because it is supposed to be sanctioned. At the same time, these attacks are effectively an attack on the freedom of speech and hence the public sphere as such. In addition, labeling journalists as political opponents brings them into a blind alley because the media cannot declare the same type of war to politicians due to its impartial nature. The third group, artists, academic community, members of international organizations (for example Dunja Mijatović, OSCE or Tanja Fajon, EP) show the government’s attitude towards every single critical thought coming from the society, not political opponents, or even media but everyone who thinks differently from the official policy. The third one probably has the most dangerous effect on society and sends a direct message not to speak up, if what one thinks is opposing the general attitude of the ruling elite.

5.3.4 Discrediting political opponents

Although parliamentary sessions shall serve for debating law provisions, in Serbian Parliament, this practice is often put to side and instead, parliamentary sessions aim to discredit the opposition. For example, to paraphrase and summarize one such discussion, where the MPs concluded that Dragan Đilas should be labeled as a person controlling everything in the country, a thief that is imposing censorship in Serbia, but is never punished for it. Further, he is portrayed as a traitor and a person who was in favor of the NATO aggression in 1999²⁸⁷. As a consequence of this particular parliamentary session, tabloids continued the attacks against Đilas. Next, we quote only a few headlines from December 2020.

- “Shame! Terrible violence against the media! The High Court banned writing about Đilas!?” (10.12.2020) *Informer*²⁸⁸.

²⁸⁶ Veljanovski, Rade/Štavljanin, Dragan (2017): The Belated and Bedeviled Media Transition in Serbia. P.46.

²⁸⁷ See PG Mreža (2020): Utisak nedelje, 13. decembar – Imunitet stada.

²⁸⁸ Informer (2020): Sramota! Najstrašnije nasilje nad medijima! Viši sud zabranio pisanje o Đilas!

- “This is extreme corruption; we are demanding an investigation to reveal who put 2.5 Million EUR in the pocket! This is a reason behind Đilas’ anxiety! Vesić: Criminal charges for Ada bridge tomorrow!” (13.12.2020) *Informer*²⁸⁹.
- “Exclusive! 2,491,507 EUR is just the "first installment" of bribery?! Shocking detail of the criminal report of the City of Belgrade against Đilas associates!” (14.12.2020) *Informer*²⁹⁰
- “Marković: Through false patriotism, Đilas and his godfather are trying to break the friendly relations with Russia” (16.12.2020) *Informer*²⁹¹.

These represent only a small part of the many published articles with similar content. Slander campaign against Đilas is probably the most extreme example in both, its yearlong duration and cruelty. Nevertheless, other opposition leaders frequently fill the tabloid headlines and are a subject of the parliamentary sessions.

One example of how a slander campaign starts with public officials and continues in the tabloids is campaign led against candidate for presidential election Vuk Jeremić in 2017. It begun with a statement issued by the ruling party (SNS) mentioning the following: “The largest criminal gang in Serbia today is around Vuk Jeremić” while “the entire drug market in Serbia is run by his wife, Nataša Jeremić”²⁹². This statement was published by various news portals, television channels, and by many tabloids. Vučić, who was president of the SNS and also a presidential candidate did issue an official apology²⁹³. However, this apology was not directed to the victim of the attack, Jeremić, but the Serbian public. This was of course not a reason enough to stop tabloids from continuing the campaign against Jeremić and his family. In the period only five days (from 20th to 15th of March 2017), a total of 367 relevant articles were published in the Serbian media on this topic. These included: 60 in the print media, 65 in the electronic media, and 242 online publications²⁹⁴. This pattern of slander comprising initial public attack, followed by a pro-forma apology, and completed with a dirty campaign by tabloids is a frequent tactics of the ruling party to discredit political opponents.

5.3.5 Discrediting journalists

One of the most recent examples of such a discrediting and smear campaign led against a journalist is the case of Žaklina Tatalović. In the last years, she was a target of tabloids, as well as of TV numerous times. Tatalović is a journalist of *NI*, a TV station that belongs to the

²⁸⁹ *Informer* (2020): To je korupcija na kvadrat, tražimo da se istraži ko je 2,5 miliona evra stavio u džep! Zato je Đilas nervozan! Vesić: Sutra krivična prijava za Most na Adi!

²⁹⁰ *Informer* (2020): Ekskluzivno! 2.491.507E samo je "prva rata" mita?! Šok detalj krivične prijave Grada Beograda protiv đilasovaca!

²⁹¹ *Informer* (2020): Marković; Đilas i njegov kum lažnim patriotizmom pokušavaju da pokvare prijateljske odnose sa Rusijom!

²⁹² Jovanov (2017): Najveća kriminalna banda je u okruženju Vuka Jeremića na celu sa šefom. In: SNS.

²⁹³ See Vučić (2017): U ime pristojne i normalne Srbije, u lično ime, izvinjavam se svim građanima. In: SNS

²⁹⁴ See BIRN (2018): Under pressure: Serbian media reporting on organized crime and corruption. P. 6-7.

CNN network and is not under Vučić's control. Attacks on Žaklina, as well as many other independent journalists, became a regular practice of the ruling elite. Editor in chief of tabloid *Informer* was chasing Žaklina on various press conferences to take a picture of her bottom and put it in the tabloid with discriminating titles. One event on TV Pink with national coverage on Sunday evening, demonstrated best how far this offending and discrediting can go. In a political talk show 'Hit tvit' folk singer Aca Lukas offended Žaklina Tatalović, after a short break that was initiated by the host of the show. Lukas continued, in a very primitive manner with discrediting, sexist and offensive remarks towards of Žaklina as a woman, journalists and so forth²⁹⁵. According to some media experts the case of Tatalović was not accidental. Serbian media scene is approaching the abyss and the insults were both primitive and conscious. This is one of the methods of intimidating journalists and the media to stop them from opposing the regime. Any person who says anything against the authorities should be shot²⁹⁶. None of the state institutions (for example REM) reacted or condemned this statement. Only two ministers in the current government did it. Many journalists and media that are pro-government oriented showed no solidarity and did not condemn the attack on Žaklina. Politicians from the ruling party as well as some opposition leaders that were in the studio did not felt obliged to protect the journalist, instead they described this event as a "conflict between a journalist and a singer". "Pink TV has the function of keeping the electorate in a constant state of intoxication with vulgar populism and that when they use such insults, they will find a way to wash themselves." But the question remains whether the viewers will hear that apology. On the other hand, what Aca Lukas said remained with the viewers. Žaklina said that the attack on her is not directed at her personally but at the *N1* television. Usually, after she asked inconvenient questions on the press conferences, Zaklina was frequently labeled by the tabloids as a "media satrap" who works for opposition leaders. According to her belief, Aca Lukas was assigned with this task by someone from Vučić's close associates²⁹⁷. Also in this case, REM continued its practice and issued no sanctions or warnings to these media despite the notice of two members of the REM Council that this lack of sanctioning by REM is only making this institution a "accomplices in the pollution of the public media space"²⁹⁸.

²⁹⁵ See Predić, Ivana (2020): Cvejić i Popović: Služba REM-a zaključkom da nije povređen zakon vređanjem novinarkе Tatalović bagateliše brutalnost. In: Cenzolovka.

²⁹⁶ See Pressing (2020): Gosti u Pressingu: Napadi na novinare imaju cilj da zastraše građane koji kritički misle. In: N1. 5:24 – 8:02.

²⁹⁷ See Beta (2020): Tatalović: Uvrede upućene meni su napad na N1. In: Danas.

²⁹⁸ Predić, Ivana (2020): Cvejić i Popović: Služba REM-a zaključkom da nije povređen zakon vređanjem novinarkе Tatalović bagateliše brutalnost. In: Cenzolovka.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated case. Journalists of the television stations *NI* and *Nova S*, as well as journalists from the independent newspapers like *NIN*, *Danas*, *Vreme* or the investigative journalist from *KRIK*, *BIRN* or *CINS* are being targeted on a regular basis. During a visit of the construction works on the COVID-19 hospital in Batajnica, Vučić stated: “The best solution, instead of losing hundreds of millions of Euros, and buying radio stations and various televisions: *NI*, *Nova S*, paying *Danas*, and all media against me ... People, it is easier to kill me!”²⁹⁹ The President indirectly accused the journalists of these media outlets of wishing for his death. This served as a basis for tabloids and TV stations to continue with discrediting of these media.

5.3.6 Discrediting artists, academics and NGO, and members of international community

Not only opposition politicians and journalists are publicly discredited. Victims of serious smear campaigns that can last months, and years are more often than not also members of the academic community. We discuss one illustrative example showcasing such these mechanisms.

Siniša Mali, ex-major of Belgrade, who was, despite the huge *Savamala*³⁰⁰ scandal promoted to Minister of Finance, was accused of plagiarizing his PhD thesis. His Professor at the Faculty of Economics, Danica Popović, at first did not believe the news, because she remembered him being a good student. However, after reading his PhD thesis, she publicly stated that he, as a person of “great potential” chose the “extremely unworthy” path. She labeled his PhD thesis as a “crime” and added that Mali was an “academic thief” who would have to pay “a large monetary compensation if, he would be living in a civilized country”³⁰¹.

This was enough to start a series of attacks and even accuse Professor Popović of plagiarism and bribery. The smear campaign was strong and on different channels, from Parliament, tabloids, to TV shows with national coverage (for example *Hit Tvit*), where a student was invited to accuse Popović in live program on Sunday evening. In the same show, Professor Raša Karapandža, who discovered plagiarism and fought for the initiation of an authentication process, was a victim of similar accusations. Besides numerous other accusations, the owner of TV Pink, Željko Mitrović said that behind accusations for plagiarism of Mali’s PhD thesis is

²⁹⁹ Informer (2020): Šta čekate više, uradite to! Vučić poslao jasnu poruku hejterima: Ubijte me već jednom, mali miševi!

³⁰⁰ See KRIK (2018): Savamala: Slučaj tapka u mestu, tužilaštvo prebacuje krivicu na policiju.

³⁰¹ Sejdimović, Nedim (2019): Velikomučenik sa plagiranim doktoratom. In: *Vreme*.

the fact that Mali stood in the way of Karapandža's "combinations with banks"³⁰². Professor in Wiesbaden, Germany, Raša Karapandža, and Professor of Belgrade University Danica Popović are just two persons out of many that went through the media lynching matrix for years.

For example, Professor Radonjić also publicly spoke about the non-academic behavior of Mali and added that he was far more concerned in the case of PhD thesis plagiarism about "the scale of the machinery set in motion to defend the indefensible"³⁰³. After numerous obstacles, student's blockade of the Rectorate of Belgrade University, a few ethic commissions, and a few years, the PhD thesis was declared plagiarism. Immediately after he was declared a plagiarist, Siniša Mali receives a medal from an Orthodox Church and was named *worthy*³⁰⁴. Along with his party colleagues, also the Church publicly stood with Minister Mali in an attempt to diminish the shame of non-academic behavior, against all others who demanded his resignation³⁰⁵.

In Serbian Parliament, Prime Minister Brnabić as well as many MPs publicly defended Mali by accusing the Rector of Belgrade University and saying that she should resign and not the Minister, or by saying that the decision to take away PhD title from Mali is a political move and that one part of the opposition is behind this decision³⁰⁶. The governing elite also utilized the mechanism of relativization by imposing to the public that Mali is an expert in finance and that his PhD is his private issue, in this way the general public shall accept that it is ok to have plagiarists on key state functions. Since SNS came to power, there is a record of plagiarism around the governing elite and Mali is just one of them.

The second example is showing how even if no one from the government is being directly accused of corruption, plagiarism, and similar, even a general attitude about the issues in one society the government considers inappropriate and immediately draws moves in order to suffocate them.

Tanja Fajon, Chair of European Parliament delegation to Serbia was also a victim of a similar campaign after a few interviews and press conferences in which she stated that the state of democracy and rule of law in Serbia can be improved. We share a few headlines of the campaign.

- "(VIDEO) Everything is clear now! Tanja Fajon is disparaging Serbia because she is indebted to the Albanians who voted for her in Slovenia!" (07. 09. 2020) *Informer*³⁰⁷.

³⁰² Alo (2019): Karapandža rskrinkan uživo u Hit Tvitu! Siniša Mali stao na put njegovim kombinacijama sa bankama. Tada je skovana zavera u koju je umešan i bivši guverner! Pravi cilj je rušenje finansijskog sistema Srbije!

³⁰³ Sejdinović, Nedom (2019): Velikomučenik sa plagiranim doktoratom. In: Vreme.

³⁰⁴ 24 minuta sa Zoranom Kesićem (2019): Kako je Siniša Mali postao velikomučenik.

³⁰⁵ See Vodinelić-Rakić, Vesna (2020): Nova čistka na Univerzitetu u Beogradu? In: Peščanik.

³⁰⁶ See Kovačević, Emina (2019): Napad na Univerzitet i Odbor – tako kolege brane ministra Malog.

³⁰⁷ Informer (2020): (Video) Sada je sve jasno! Tanja Fajon gaji Srbiju jer je dužna Albancima koji su glasali za nju u Sloveniji!

- „She was called a Firer! Slovenian magazine “Demokracija” shattered Tanja Fajon” (08.10.2020) *Alo*³⁰⁸.
- “Representative of Serbian political-media octopus’ interests is well known to the public! Đurić: Fajon is abusing the brand of the European Parliament” (22.09.2020) *Kurir*³⁰⁹.

Despite the tabloid smear campaign, Tanja Fajon continued doing her job, even after Vučić demanded her removal from team of the European Parliament for the upcoming debate between the government and the opposition³¹⁰. It remains unclear why the reaction from the European Union and Tanja Fajon are mild, when everyone knows that behind these attacks is the current governing structure in Serbia.

Florian Bieber, Professor at the University in Graz was few times a victim of the smear campaign by Serbian tabloids. He is popular on Twitter among Serbian users and was invited by a cable TV station *NI* several times to comment on the political developments in Serbia and the region in which he talked about his research findings on de-democratization of political system in Serbia, endangered rule of law etc. As a consequence of public appearing as well as tweets on his personal account, he is being labelled as an Albanian lobbyist, enemy of the state and similar. Even the President Vučić himself tried to degrade Bieber’s competences by saying, on Pink television, that Prof. Bieber is “nobody and no one”³¹¹. We provide a few headlines to support the argument.

- „Bieber is one of the lonely dinosaurs of the past! Đurić tore Albanian lobbyist apart!” (24.09.2020) *Informer*³¹².
- “The Siptar lobbyist pits on Serbs again, he mentioned Milošević again but was silenced! Bieber and Đurić made war on Twitter!” (28.08.2020) *Informer*³¹³.
- „Florian Bieber got in trouble on Twitter because of the attack on Vučić” (17.03.2020) *Alo*³¹⁴.
- “Pathetic! The Siptar lobbyist used lies to attack dead Patriarch Irinej and Serbia!” (20.11.2020) *Informer*³¹⁵.

³⁰⁸ Alo (2020): Nazvali je firerkom! Slovenački časopis "Demokracija" rasturio Tanju Fajon!

³⁰⁹ Kurir (2020): Marko Đurić: Fajon zloupotrebljava brend Evropskog parlamenta.

³¹⁰ NovaS (2021): Tanja Fajon: Vučić je tražio moje izuzeće iz dijaloga vlasti i opozicije 14:14 – 16:21

³¹¹ Direktno (2020): Biber odgovorio: Vučiću, ko sam ja?

³¹² Informer (2020): Bieber je jedan od usamljenih dinosaurusu minulog vremena! Đurić rasturio albanskog lobistu!

³¹³ Informer (2020): Šiptarski lobista opet pljuje po Srbima, spomenuo I Miloševića, ali je ućutkan! Bieber i Đurić zaratili na Tviteru!

³¹⁴ Alo (2020): Florijan Biber nagrabusio na tviteru zbog napada na Vučića.

³¹⁵ Informer (2020): Jadno! Šiptarski lobista lažima udario na preminulog patrijarha Irineja i Srbiju!

- “Government is not even formed yet, but the state enemy Bieber is already predicting its failures! Đurić: Florian and its financiers do not want democracy in Serbia” (23.10.2020) *Informer*³¹⁶.

5.3.7 Blaming and shaming

As a consequence of the global COVID-19 pandemic, medical staff came into the public spotlight. Every time, any medical personnel would say that the health system is weak or broken or that the measures adopted by the government are not sufficient, these persons would suffer dire consequences.

As a response to the governments and the national COVID-19 crisis management team inability to introduce right measures to cease the virus, a group of 350 doctors sharply distanced themselves from the official policy and demanded the dismissal of the crisis team. According to this group of doctors named “United against the Covid”, Serbia was in a public health catastrophe.³¹⁷ At the beginning of September, this initiative grew into an association of citizens. The number of doctors who supported the open letter with their signatures has had reached almost 3,000. Because of openly criticizing the government measures to combat the virus or for suggesting a better way, these doctors became a topic in the tabloids and/or they started having problems at work. Many of those doctors were downgraded³¹⁸. On VMA (The Military Medical Academy), after the announcement of the dismissal from the chief function, they were asked to withdraw their signature from the proclamation “United against the Covid”³¹⁹. Doctors that stood up were exposed to blaming and shaming campaigns in which they were even connected to Đilas – a symbol of corruption according to the ruling elite and the tabloids. This is illustrated by following headlines:

- “The worst hypocrisy of Đilas’ doctor! Radovanović spits and attacks, and when his help is needed, needs help – he does not even think of it!” (10.07.2020) *Informer*³²⁰.
- “He has no time to help colleagues in the fight against Corona virus but likes to discuss the functioning of the G-spot!” (13.07.2020) *Informer*³²¹.

Not even a world-wide health crisis and a lack of medical staff was a reason enough to repress the need to stifle dissent and criticism and put the need of society at the forefront.

³¹⁶ *Informer* (2020): Zastupnik interesa političko-medijske hobotnice iz Srbije koja je javnosti dobra poznata! Đurić: Fajon zloupotrebljava brend Evropskog parlamenta.

³¹⁷ See Ujedinjeni protiv kovida (2020): Otvoreno pismo Vladi RS i ostalim nadležnim institucijama.

³¹⁸ See Beta (2020): N1: Smenjeni načelnici sa VMA koji su podržali proglas „Ujedinjeni protiv kovida“. In: Danas.

³¹⁹ See N1 (2020): Antić o smeni tri načelnika VMA: Tražili im da povuku potpis sa peticije.

³²⁰ *Informer* (2020): Najgore licemerje Đilasovog doktora! Radovanović pljuje i napada, a kad treba da pomogne – ne pada mu na pamet!

³²¹ *Informer* (2020): Nema vremena da pomogne kolegama u birbi protiv korone, ali rado raspravlja o funkcionisanju G tačke!

5.3.8 Relativization

The relativization mechanism is mostly used when a serious affair emerges. These affairs cannot be completely hidden or controlled, so the relativization mechanism reduces their scope and importance. What is more, it tries to put similar events from the past in the spotlight in order to set a different agenda and other actors to the forefront. In this section, we present two different cases.

First case is a death in an ammunition and arms factory in a small town Lučani. The President himself relativized the death of a worker in an ammunition and arms factory by saying that “the young man had to be aware that he was not working on a model runway but in an ammunition and arms factory”³²². Although there were evidences that the protection of workers was on a very low level and that more hazardous material was stored in much larger quantities than permitted, the President publicly abolished the director of the state-owned factory. Many believe that this happened because the director is a close associate of the ruling party. Family of the victim was offered a monetary compensation to cover up the case, as it was the practice with several deaths in the factory until then (21 death in last 38 years during which the director did not change). After the family refused the offer, they have received threats which also gave no expected results, and after the public pressure, the director was finally criminally charged. What makes this case even worse is the fact that the workers, were forced and blackmailed to come to the director's trial (the director of the factory was charged for bad working conditions and omissions) and give him public support³²³. These rallies of support were then disseminated by the tabloids, in order to create a positive image of the director³²⁴.

If every government is remembered by one scandal, then SNS will probably be remembered by *Savamala*. This represents our second example of relativization. The case signalized the beginning of an end of the legal state and independent institutions. It proved democratic backsliding and showed the power of authoritarian government that will continue to rise in the years to come. It all started on the night of parliamentary elections in Serbia (24-25 April 2016). While all media coverage was focused on the results of the elections, a block of buildings in Belgrade downtown area Savamala was being demolished.

Civil Rights Defenders dedicated one whole report solely to the media coverage of the Savamala case. Authors of the report claim that the case of Savamala is pertinent to understanding media freedom in Serbia, as well as how the most selling media work for the

³²² Tanjug (2017): Fabrika Milan Blagojević primenjuje sve mere zaštite, akcidenti mogući. In: Novosti.

³²³ Insajder (2019): Vučić obećao sastanak ocu mladića poginulog u Namenskoj: Ne rade oni na manekenskoj pisti, već u fabrici oružja. 11.06.2019 Retrieved from: <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/14738/>

³²⁴ Živanović, Katarina (2019): Radnike Namenske teraju da tuže Danas i Blic. In: Danas.

public interest. The report covers select daily newspapers, as its authors argue that the daily press shapes the discussion on topics which are of significant public importance³²⁵.

One of the conclusions of this report is that the difference in coverage is directly related to circulation, type of papers, and editorial policy. “The higher the circulation there is less coverage on Savamala, more bias, less objectivity, and the least criticism of the government”³²⁶. The second interesting finding relates to circulation and independence which is found to be inversely proportional. So the daily *Danas* (quality, not under government control), the one with the smallest circulation has published 50% of all stories about Savamala during the observed period, whereas *Informer* (tabloid, close ties to the government), with the highest circulation among the dailies, even less than 5% of all stores about Savamala³²⁷.

The study also showed that thematic variety and the range of opinions and different interviewees decrease as media circulation and ties to the government rise. Pro-government daily newspapers lack any criticism towards the government, instead, their political bias is high. Two more characteristics of the extremely pro-government media were noticed: high praises of the government accompanied by a frequently attacks on government critics, as well as often attacking the mainstream media which report critically and demanded answers from the government³²⁸.

Let us look at some concrete examples of texts published related to Savamala.

- “Vučić explained: Persons who decided to demolish buildings in Savamala during the night are complete idiots!” (10.05.2020) *Informer*³²⁹.

This text, as well as almost all published text in the most selling daily *Informer* and other tabloids (*Kurir*, *Alo*, *Srpski Telegraf*) relativizes the demolishing in Savamala. The text comes down to several quotes of President Vučić and includes no other aspect, a report from the Ombudsman, or other interlocutors. Citizens can learn from this kind of reporting that it is a matter of demolishing illegal buildings in which no one was injured. As if the biggest mistake was that the buildings were demolished under the cover of night and not during the day because they were all ugly, dirty illegal buildings, and that the President himself would have gladly participated in the demolition if he had been invited. The fact that the police did not respond to numerous calls from citizens in the text was also relativized by the statement of the president who said that “nobody forbade the police to react during the demolition, as the Protector of

³²⁵ See Milivojević Snježana (2018): The case of Savamala. P.9.

³²⁶ Ibid. P.29.

³²⁷ See Ibid. P.29.

³²⁸ Ibid. P.30.

³²⁹ Tanjug (2016): Vučić objasnio: Oni koji su odlučili da objekte u Savamali ruše noću su kompletni idioti! In: *Informer*.

Citizens Saša Janković claims, but that the police called on the communal police because of the power outage and the work that was being done”³³⁰. The text quotes the President and his association on ski masks, which served to cover up the faces of the perpetrators: “... which probably left from the time of privatization, when they loot factories, robbed and snatched money from people...”³³¹.

In this way, all important aspects of the extremely disturbing event and the incredible fact that the Police did not respond to calls from citizens, that no one was arrested and prosecuted for deprivation of liberty and destruction of private property that was partly legalized and partly in the process of legalization. Further, some visions of the president himself served to open a space for new topics that have nothing to do with the event - the masks of the former government. The tabloids caught up with the subject masks and in the following days wrote texts about how Milošević was arrested by members of Police who wore masks, which has no connection with the demolition in Savamala³³². The obvious intention is to divert the readers’ attention to something completely unimportant and connect it with the former government, which in every mention is presented as rusty, evil, and corrupt.

Although there were reasonable suspicions that the Mayor and the country leaders organized this action in which several excavators were used, around 30 people and that the former wife of Mayor Mali stated that he personally was bragging about organizing this action himself, later even the president of the state confirmed it by saying that the highest city government officials were responsible for the demolition in Savamala, the prosecution was sloppy and conducted an investigation under a veil of secrecy. Two, until then still independent institutions, the Commissioner and the Protector of Citizens, conducted a joint investigation and constantly appealed for the case to be resolved in court, as well as the EU and numerous international organizations³³³. This only served to set the Protector of Citizens Saša Janković and the Commissioner Rodoljub Šabić as targets of the tabloids and victims of negative campaigns. Only by reading the tabloids, it was not possible to find out that the security guard was tied up and that he was being intimidated not to tell anyone about the event, and that bystanders had their phones confiscated, and were also intimidated and identified by masked persons. A reader

³³⁰ Tanjug (2016): Vučić objasnio: Oni koji su odlučili da objekte u Savamali ruše noću su kompletni idioti! In: *Informer*.

³³¹ *Ibid*.

³³² See *Informer* (2016): Milorad Ulemek Legija, prvi intervju iz zatvorske ćelije: Hapšenje Miloševića naplaćeno 5.000.000 dolara!

³³³ See Protector of Citizens (2016): Izvestaj o postupku kontrole zakonitosti i pravilnosti rada Ministarstva unutrašnjih poslova.

of the tabloids could not find out that guard died a month later in the hospital, instead, the tabloid *Informer* reported:

- “Not a security guard but a homeless man! Shame on you Janković and Šabić, you are caught red-handed again!” (25.05.2016) *Informer*³³⁴.

As a consequence of complete ignorance of state institutions, massive non-violent protests were held in Belgrade. These protests were, in tabloid news, labeled as:

- “Conspiracy against Serbian authorities! Protectors of chaos: Janković and Šabić with Scott and Davenport are bringing Vučić down” (10.06.2016) *Informer*³³⁵.
- “Ombudsman is causing chaos in Serbia! Janković rolls us a duck, and we pay him 376,648 dinars (around 3000 EUR at that time)” (15.07.2016) *Informer*³³⁶.

The tabloids use these bombastic headlines to attack anyone who questions the responsibility of state institutions, but also the reasons behind the demolition, and that is Belgrade Waterfront, the first secret contract Serbian state made with Arab investors. Not only Savamala was demolished in order to clear the area for building Belgrade Waterfront, but also urban planning of the city center and public use of space was put into private interests and not the citizens, all followed by multiple cases of abuse by the city and the republican bodies³³⁷.

The tabloids do not ask or mention in shallow texts why private property is being demolished or how much the Belgrade Waterfront project, funded by all citizens, costs. The connection between the authorities and the tabloids became more obvious as well as the lack of protection of the public interest when it comes to objective information. “The illegal demolition of buildings at a time when public attention was focused on the election results and under cover of night speaks of the wider reliance of the undemocratic government on informal means of authoritarian manipulation”³³⁸.

Authors of the report about media coverage of this case provide an interpretation of the findings by saying that “the lack of criticism towards the government threatens the public awareness by normalizing the belief that the role of media is not to enable responsible government but to control the public”³³⁹. Authors rightly expressed their concerns that this tendency can bring to the belief across society that critical media are obsolete³⁴⁰.

³³⁴ *Informer* (2016): Nije čuvar, nego beskućnik! Jankoviću i Šabiću, sram vas bilo, opet ste uhvaćeni u laži!

³³⁵ *Informer* (2016): Zavera protiv vlasti u Srbiji! Zaštitnici haosa: Janković i Šabić sa Skotom i Devenportom ruše Vučića!

³³⁶ *Informer* (2016): I zaštitnik građana izaziva kaos u Srbiji! Janković nam uvaljuje patku, a mi ga plaćamo 376.648 din!

³³⁷ Academy of architecture of Serbia (2015): Declaration on Belgrade Waterfront.

³³⁸ Vladislavljević, Nebojša (2019): The rise and fall of democracy in Serbia after Milosević. P.16.

³³⁹ Milivojević Snježana (2018): The case of Savamala. In: Civil Rights Defenders. P.31.

³⁴⁰ See Ibid. P.31.

“The case of Savamala became a paradigm of the rule of law and media freedom situation in Serbia”³⁴¹. From today's point of view, we can say that it was an introduction to the authoritarian way of ruling the country in all aspects, where the media was just one puzzle in the system. And a puzzle that, due to its nature and the need to inform the public, provides an opportunity to peek into other spheres of government.

5.4 Security intelligence abuse

This section is dealing with the connection between the state security services such as Security Intelligence Agency (BIA), Military Intelligence Agency (VOA), Military Security Agency (VBA) and the tabloid media. We aim to show another aspect of authoritarian style of governing by examining how the state secret services are used to combat freedom of speech, intimidate journalists and disable them from doing their job. First, we make an excursion in the law changes and its implication after SNS came to power, then we show a few examples of how secret services are being used as a private tool of the governing elites to put journalists under surveillance. Then we move on by looking at how tabloids receive information from secret services for discrediting campaigns against journalists, we also shortly discuss information leakage to tabloids. Lastly, we conclude with the explanation how the abovementioned mechanisms complement each other.

In an interview he gave for the purpose of this research, Georgiev explained his view on the main mechanisms of the rule of Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party³⁴². According to him, security services and the media are the key two areas where Vučić and his party established control of the state. Georgiev is emphasizing the law change that was made under urgent procedure shortly after SNS came to power in 2012 had a significant effect in establishing this control³⁴³. Mentioned law change made Aleksandar Vučić a main person in charge of overseeing all security services as well as a person holding a lot of power whilst holding a position of the Minister of Defense as well as president of the Serbian Progressive Party³⁴⁴. The fact that power is concentrated in the hands of one party and one person is not in line with the democratic principles, Geogiev warns also about the degrading of the institutions on the highest level. In his view, it is unacceptable that the President of the country holds press

³⁴¹ Ibid. P.29.

³⁴² For more details and illustrations see full transcript of the interview in the Appendix I.

³⁴³ For the sake of completeness: the laws and the overall situation around the security services also before SNS took power was not only based on democratic principles. In contrary, Serbia missed the opportunity to fully reform the security services and the roots the current situation can be found there. More information available here: Petrović, Predrag/Nikić-Pejić, Jelena (2020): Zarobljavanje sektora bezbednosti u Srbiji. Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku.

³⁴⁴ Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku (2012): Bezbednosno-obaveštajni sistem Srbije se kroji po diktatu Aleksandra Vučića.

conferences in which he reveals the details of the investigation, known only to the security services and police, or announces who will be arrested³⁴⁵, who is located, who is a criminal etc³⁴⁶. Although, as a President of the country has no mandate to speak in the name of the independent institutions and reveal details of ongoing or upcoming investigations, due to his roles in the security sector, he had all necessary information. These information Vučić shared on the press conferences, which contributed to growth of his popularity and power, both among society and in the SNS³⁴⁷. Although, in 2021 he is no longer officially holding this position, Vučić managed to appoint his loyal associates to the key function holders how in the country, so in the security sector and manages to continuously misuse the information these bodies are gathering in his purposes, populist but also against dissidents.

The way Vučić was interfering with investigations by condemning individuals before the case was brought to the court did raise his popularity, but it also endangered independence of democratic institutions. Judge Miodrag Majić perceives this also as a pressure to the judiciary: “There is no need to call anyone [judges] directly by phone if completely clear and unambiguous messages are sent [by politicians] ... and especially if a certain case is being prepared in the media for months.” He also concluded that the consequence of such practice is that “we only formally do not conduct proceeding in the media”³⁴⁸.

Very often, confidential information is being placed to public without taking laws and procedures into consideration. One such case was also when Aleksandar Vučić brought his own record from BIA that is labeled as state secret and started reading some details. Up until this event, there were already a few alleged coup d'etat that never took place, but this was the first time that a President came out in public with a confidential document that is unclear how he got in possession of. It remains also unknown how could the President read his record and make public details of some conversations he had in past with some persons and why these conversations are kept a state secret.

As a result of such practices, many experts note that “security services today are more and more exceeding their competences and more often behave like the political police”³⁴⁹ as well as that “the protection of the constitutional order and the fight against espionage are being

³⁴⁵ For example, arresting one of the most powerful businessman Miroslav Mišković, end of 2012.

³⁴⁶ See Appendix 1. P.12.

³⁴⁷ Petrović, Predrag (2020): Anatomija zarobljavanja bezbednosno-obaveštajnog sektora u Srbiji. Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku. P.11.

³⁴⁸ BIRN (2018): Under pressure: Serbian media reporting on organized crime and corruption. P.11

³⁴⁹ Petrović, Predrag (2020): Anatomija zarobljavanja bezbednosno-obaveštajnog sektora u Srbiji. Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku. P.4.

transformed into the protection of the ruling party and the fight against internal enemies”³⁵⁰. One of such enemies are journalists.

5.4.1 Journalists on the Security Services radar

In the following sections, we show how the authoritarian leaders through captured security services manages confidential and personal data of citizens and at the same time uses tabloids for two purposes. On one hand side, for fight against opponents (journalists, political opponents), making pressure (judges) and on the other hand side for the purpose of legalizing the monitoring of journalists and other individuals or groups.

Stevan Dojčinović, editor in chief of *KRIK* claims that there is a “well-established pattern between the security services and the tabloids”³⁵¹. A few security scandals related to surveillance of journalists went public that can confirm the thesis of a good relationship tabloids have with the security services. For example, Goran Vesić, deputy Mayor of Belgrade (from SNS) in a TV program boasted that he had an insight into the internal communication of *N1* journalists, which, can be interpreted as a confirmation of suspicions that ‘unsuitable’ media are being spied on³⁵². The second aspect of this issue is that this was not mentioned nor discussed on the public broadcaster. This created a double problem, on one hand side, the fact that “unsuitable” journalists are spied on is being normalized, and on the other hand, journalists who work on TV with national frequency do not question the justification of such surveillance and presenting internal communication to the public with an aim to discredit their work.

Next security scandal is known as the “Vulingate” when Minister of Defense Aleksandar Vulin, in a morning program on a TV station with national coverage commented on an article that was not even published yet. The article was written by the ex-minister of Defense Šutanovac and sent to the weekly *Nedeljnik* but was not published and it became obvious that this communication was intercepted. The process is initiated in the prosecutor's office a year ago, but still without a closure³⁵³.

KRIK journalist believes that the fact that the conversations of the members of the editorial office were published on the front page of *Informer*, and that President Vučić uttered some details of their internal conversation on TV *Pink*, is a clear sign that the journalist of *KRIK* were under surveillance. *Informer* even said in court that everything they published in this regard was true, and that it can be checked in the BIA which indicates that state institutions

³⁵⁰ Ibid. P.4.

³⁵¹ 360 stepeni (2020): Miodrag Majić i Stevan Dojčinović o najavljenj borbi protiv mafije. In: N1. 26:10 – 27: 21.

³⁵² Sovilj, Miodrag (2019): Slučaj "Vesić i mejlovi N1" i epska zamena teza javnih funkcionera. In: N1.

³⁵³ Nešić, Nenad (2020): Vulin ne zna za slučaj Vulina i Nedeljnika. In: N1.

gave information gathered by surveillance by the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA) to *Informer*³⁵⁴.

5.4.2 Deliberate information leakage

In some cases, it turned out that the tabloids had correct information from the power structures of the events that are about to come or arrests that will be made in the next days. The key mechanism of setting the agenda is the access to information where the tabloids close to the government have access to anonymous sources and even to the information directly from police³⁵⁵. According to many experts this kind of information leakage is deliberately made³⁵⁶. And besides the fact that the information is leaked to the pro government media, it is also a criminal offence³⁵⁷. In special, politically sensitive cases, such information is leaking directly from the minister's office³⁵⁸.

Former chairman of the Security Services Control Committee also confirms that police powers are being abused for political purposes. "They follow political opponents and critics of the regime, monitor their communication, blackmail ... All the compromising material published by the tabloids comes from them"³⁵⁹.

Another example of the connection of tabloids and the state security services is the picture of a Deputy Special Prosecutor Saša Ivanić for organized crime which appeared in a tabloid. This case was investigated by the Commissioner, who proved that an operative from BIA accessed the base just before it was published in a tabloid. Although the Commissioner conducted the investigation and filed a criminal complaint, the epilogue from the High Technology Crime Prosecution is still pending³⁶⁰. Ivanić was a Prosecutor of various court proceedings against one of the biggest narco-bosses in Serbia, Darko Sarić and a controversial businessman Stanko Subotić Cane. Retired Chief of the Criminal Police Directorate Rodoljub Milović, referred to the publication of Ivanić's photos as an example of how media behavior can contribute to insecurity among the judiciary, suggesting that the move contributed to Ivanić's danger³⁶¹.

This issue exists for years now and as a consequence of not dealing with it, it only grows. Despite the fact that the law foresees a punishment up to three years in prison, nobody was ever sentenced, there was not even a single criminal proceeding. According to the Commissioner

³⁵⁴ Beta (2020): Tribina UNS: Treba nastaviti pritisak da se otkrije ko prisluškuje novinare u Srbiji.

³⁵⁵ See BIRN (2018): Under pressure: Serbian media reporting on organized crime and corruption. P.12.

³⁵⁶ See BIRN (2017): Dokumentarni film „Policija i mediji“. 20:23 – 20:50.

³⁵⁷ See Ibid.

³⁵⁸ See BIRN (2018): Under pressure: Serbian media reporting on organized crime and corruption. P.12.

³⁵⁹ Beta (2019). Bivši načelnik VBA: Bezbednosne službe danas služe političkoj opciji na vlasti. Beograd, N1.

³⁶⁰ See Insajder (2016): Who is responsible for leaking the prosecutor's photo from the MUP database?

³⁶¹ See BIRN (2018): Under pressure: Serbian media reporting on organized crime and corruption. P.11.

this just illustrated a trend that is present for years and if this happens with the data that are in possession of a state security services, what can be expected from others who also work on gathering of data? If personal data of a Deputy Special Prosecutor for organized crime are not protected, the question arises what kind of protection do ordinary citizens have³⁶²?

In an interview for *KRIK*, President of the High Court Stepanović explained the connection between the tabloids, and BIA on his own example when the editor in chief of a pro-government tabloid *Srpski Telegraf* said to him that the questions he prepared for the interview are actually forwarded to him from BIA. Judge also added that identical questions were sent to him from the same tabloid in the past few years³⁶³. The judge was a victim of several smear campaigns by the pro-government tabloids, which he observes as a political pressure and intimidation resulted from the fact that he started publicly speaking including also round tables with international actors, about the problems judiciary is facing such as political pressure from the highest state officials, lack of cases of high corruptions, criticizing the Republic Public Prosecutor etc.³⁶⁴.

There are even more obvious examples such as the Editor in chief of a tabloid *Informer*, who is commenting on events, issues and investigations and acts as a personal PR of the President Vučić. He often goes public, usually on *TV Pink* with confidential information about some criminal tights with the opposition, but in the most recent affaire, he was speaking about the relationship between the state officials have with criminal gangs³⁶⁵. In these sessions, which are full of sensationalism, statements that have no relation to facts, half-truths, serve to protect the image of the President even if it is proven that his closest associates are cooperating with criminals. The President is portrayed as a naïve victim of his environment which is clearly abolishing him of any responsibility in the eyes of his supporters.

5.4.3 Tabloids as a tool for legalizing surveillance

According to the law, one can be put under surveillance only if there is a reasonable doubt to believe that this person or a group is a threat to the state or society. How are then journalists and political opponents under surveillance? According to journalists and some control institutions, this occurs in cooperation with the tabloids, which are used to place a disinformation that would be a reason enough to get a court signature to put the person under

³⁶² See Insajder (2016): Who is responsible for leaking the prosecutor's photo from the MUP database?

³⁶³ See KRIK (2020): Predsednik Višeg suda Stepanović: Nemamo suđenja za visoku korupciju, Dolovac daje izjave kao da živimo u Skandinaviji.

³⁶⁴ See KRIK (2020): Predsednik Višeg suda Stepanović: Nemamo suđenja za visoku korupciju, Dolovac daje izjave kao da živimo u Skandinaviji.

³⁶⁵ Štetin Lakić, Jovana (2021): Đukanović Vučiću pismo piše – slobodna kritika ili „volej“ na temu Stefanović. In: N1.

surveillance. “The media under the control of the intelligence or the party, which is almost the same today, first launches a lie or half-truth about you, which associates you with criminals and foreign security intelligence, and then that is the reason for them to put you legally under surveillance”³⁶⁶.

5.5 Discussion

5.5.1 How powerful are tabloids?

The power and influence of tabloids is big, they are the most selling print newspapers on the market, the most selling among them, *Informer* is sold at a price of 0,17 EUR, although it may sound impossible that a newspaper can survive with such price. We have already discussed the ways of funding in the previous section, so it does not come as a surprise that a paper that is being funded from multiple state funds does not rely on income from the readers, instead, the main funder of the paper spreads its influence as the number of sold copies increases.

The tools we discussed above are used in some cases all together, for a better spin of the public. In essence, they are covering up the shocking scandals of the state leadership. When investigative journalists reveal a story such as Jovanjica³⁶⁷, a cannabis farm, which received government funds and is connected to the state officials, SNS, BIA and the police, tabloids start an orchestrated campaign focusing on another issue in order for the corruption case to go unnoticed. The campaign of tabloids goes in parallel with the campaign of state officials and the plenary discussions in the Parliament and on channels on TV. Allegedly “shocking” details of, for example potential war with neighbors appears in the tabloids, everyone in a controlled public sphere is talking only about that for days. Depending on how big the affair is, imaginary wars are made that last a day or two, a week. Often, the security of the president himself is involved in everything, as well as a coup that has been announced several times and has never happened.

Most of the Serbian people probably remember that the professor who accused Minister Mali of plagiarism is a plagiarist himself and a person involved in bribery. Minister Mali was presented and perceived as a victim of a malicious campaign by the political opponents of SNS. Saša Janković, who has been a victim of tabloid campaigns on several occasions, says that there is no way or means that untruth can be erased from people's consciousness. Because people do not function on the principle: “until I see the verdict, he is innocent”³⁶⁸.

³⁶⁶ Petrović, Predrag (2020): Anatomija zarobljavanja bezbednosno-obaveštajnog sektora u Srbiji. P.50.

³⁶⁷ More information in english available here: Dragojlo, Saša: (2020): Organic High: State Complicity in Serbian Drug Farm a “Stain” on Government.

³⁶⁸ Radojević, Vesna/Divac, Maja (2017): Tabloidizacija medija. In: PG Mreža. 14:28 – 15:10

Tabloids that belonged to the entertainment part of journalism, in Serbia evolved into propaganda and then into a tool for destroying people's lives in the name of the ruling party. "If affairs are fabricated in order to be used as manipulation, people being intimidated and slandered without evidence, that is everything, just not journalism, it's not propaganda either. It's a crime. An informal way to destroy human lives and careers"³⁶⁹. These media slander campaigns in tabloids, are perceived as "the death of journalism and, what is even more important, the death of morality and the rule of law"³⁷⁰.

5.5.2 Spillover effect of tabloidization: from print tabloids via tabloid television to tabloidization of the state

The worrying tendency of the increasingly prominent third group/ideology of journalists is researched also by many experts and analytics. Striving for profit led to a complete neglect of journalistic standards and lawbreaking. Veljanovski explains that also commercial television with national coverage have a legal obligation to facilitate free, truthful, objective, complete and timely informing³⁷¹. He underlined that it is "a delusion that private media can do whatever they want"³⁷². As outlined in the previous chapter, according to the Law on Electronic Media, broadcasting permission is granted only after the TV station has applied with a program elaborate in which the concept and the content are specified.

TV stations in Serbia however violate this law. One of the examples that is spreading more and more are reality shows. Although, broadcast of reality shows in Serbia begun before SNS took power, during their rule they evolved into something much more powerful: full control of the public opinion and a propaganda tool. Initially, these shows were conceptualized for entertainment purposes with ordinary people, but in the meantime folk singers entered this arena and the number of such reality shows increased as well as their viewership and the number of hours they take on the television daily. By offering 'scandalous' TV shows or reality program with sexual content in which crosswords belong to the normal language, it comes to a dumbing down of the population³⁷³. Because these reality shows are broadcast also during the day, it makes them available to the entire population, including children. Popular tabloids made these stars of reality shows almost role models. Serbia is one extreme example of it, where Kristijan Golubović, a convicted drug dealer and prisoner, had an opportunity to leave jail in order to enter a reality show for a few months. This is how the media offers 'attractive' content instead

³⁶⁹ N1 (2016): Mediji u Srbiji: Hronika propadanja. 9. epizoda 17:47 – 18:02

³⁷⁰ Ibid. 24:25 – 24:43

³⁷¹ PG Mreža (2020): Informisanje u interesu javnosti. Transcript

³⁷² PG Mreža (2020): Informisanje u interesu javnosti. Transcript

³⁷³ See ANEM (2015): XII Legal Monitoring of the Serbian Media Scene. P.42.

of a cultural, informative or educational one. The ruling elite recognized the power and influence such content has on the society, and now reality shows are full of political topics and supporters of the ruling party and of the President Vučić. One of such examples is Golubović, who, as well as other ‘stars’ which participate in such reality shows, promote SNS publicly on TV almost on a daily basis³⁷⁴.

Tabloidization of television through reality shows, as well as other programs in which ‘reality stars’ are being celebrated or are invited as guests in socio-political talk shows morning programs etc. is one aspect of the media scene in Serbia (see above when a folk singer participates in a political talk show on Sunday evening and humiliates a journalist). To this, we add several ‘stars’ that praise the president Vučić or the government, and the scene is upgraded in addition to dumbing down of the society manipulating and spreading propaganda are added.

There are indications that not only media is tabloidized, just as how easily it was transferred from newspaper to TV, but this phenomenon also has a spillover effect on society, the Parliament, and state institutions. If we analyze a few official statements of ministries of the government, we can identify the informal language and colloquialism that were identified at the beginning of the tabloidization process³⁷⁵. That same tabloid-style, however still not in its full shape, but we do notice a trend of tabloidization of state institutions. Experienced journalists think that the language, that is rich in bad language and offences, President Vučić and other public officials are using is not acceptable in the public sphere³⁷⁶. When President is quoting how he is being named on social media, and the examples are very rude, he is normalizing it for a common use, in the first line the tabloids but then also for other state officials, institutions etc. Reality show manner is transferred to the Parliament, press conferences of the highest state officials, serious TV program etc.

Tabloidization of the state occurred when the state stops using its democratic institutions for achieving its goals, instead, press conferences are serving for this purpose. “The state does not achieve its goals through state bodies but through its tabloids and that is why there are press conferences where citizens are presented with problems and solutions”³⁷⁷.

In addition to the mentioned issues of tabloidization of the state, we would add also the downgrading of the democratic institutions such as the Parliament which consequently lead to losing its purpose and at the same time citizens lose trust in the democracy and its core values

³⁷⁴ See Direktno (2020): Počela kampanja, Kristijan uz SNS: Vučić nam daje vodu!

³⁷⁵ One example for a tabloid-style report: Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (2019): Odgovor Saveta na tekst u dnevnom listu Danas “REM uvek radi u službi aktuelne vlasti”.

³⁷⁶ Krasić, Daniela Ilić (2020): Mališić: Postali smo vulgarno pleme koje gazi jedno drugo. In: Nova.rs,

³⁷⁷ Radojević, Vesna/Divac, Maja (2017): Tabloidizacija medija. In: PG Mreža. 20:59 – 21:23

– independent institutions. Besides the fact that there is no opposition and no debate in the Parliament, it became a tabloids muse. Very often, the media lynch matrix would start in the place that is supposed to serve for a public debate, but instead MPs release information that is not true or partially true about an individual or a group (journalists) that publicly disagreed or criticized the government. Such information is then conveyed as true by tabloids and commercial televisions with national coverage, often local ones too. The picture of the targeted individual is put on the screen the whole day with the same discrediting labeling. Then, on the scene come ‘analysts’ commenting on it and the lynching campaign is joined by government representatives, which is the most dangerous³⁷⁸. In this way, the circle is closed in just a few days from a false information to a fully convinced public in its correctness. The ruling elite controls all segments of the circle: the Parliament, the tabloids, the TV media and the ‘analysts’.

Although, the smear campaign are frequently led on a basis of no evidences, state institutions turn blind eye to it, REM does not react when it comes to sanctioning hate speech, nor the judiciary by prosecuting the one who spread false news or/and cause panic. The above-mentioned path from tabloidization of the daily press via the TV channels is only one of the paths leading to a tabloidization of the state. Another aspect of this ecosystem is the role of the security services as a link in this chain, which is also abused in the process of increasing control over the state and media sector. “Still-bonding client ties between the security services and politicians in power have only strengthened, so that today they are almost more important regulator of the relationship between the security services and politics than the law and the Constitution. Therefore, it is not surprising that the security services in Serbia today pose more of a threat to the democratic order, instead of being in function of preserving it”³⁷⁹. The security services are a victim of tabloidization, as well as an important factor in the tabloidization process in Serbia.

6 Effects of the global pandemic on media and democracy in Serbia

6.1 Introduction

Whenever the human population faced a big crisis, problems in society surfaced, became more visible, and deepened. Democracy during the corona crisis in Serbia finally showed its non-existence, there was not even the façade covering it. As discussed above, the democracy in Serbia was in a decline for years now, freedoms were eroding, and institutional

³⁷⁸ Insajder (2020): Tačka 2. Transcript.

³⁷⁹ Petrović, Predrag (2020): Anatomija zarobljavanja bezbednosno-obaveštajnog sektora u Srbiji. P.9.

weakness and manipulation of media were more and more obvious. The pandemic just enlightened how bad the situation really was and made it even worse. We discuss below several events that can confirm this thesis.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Dr. Nestorović, a member of the COVID-19 crisis management team in the Republic of Serbia labeled the virus, during a press conference, as the “funniest virus in the history of humankind” and recommended to everyone to go shopping in Milan, since there must be sales now³⁸⁰. President Vučić was laughing and was convinced there is no reason for any worries. Immediately after collecting signatures for the upcoming elections, a state of emergency was declared. This was the phase of apocalypse and blaming of citizens who traveled back to Serbia for spreading the virus. Lockdown and measures that seriously endangered basic human rights, like humiliating lockdown of people above 65 years for weeks (except from 4 am to 7 am). Only a few weeks after, just before the elections, measures were put out of force, football games, a tennis tournament, were held, which contributed to the rapid spread of the virus. Nevertheless, this did not worry Vučić, as he used the pandemic to lead a successful campaign and consequently won the vast majority of the electoral vote. Over 190 seats in Parliament out of 250 are reserved for his party, SNS. The majority of the real opposition boycotted the election. As mentioned earlier, democracy in Serbia is endangered as there is no real opposition, and the country is very close to becoming a one-party system. Right after the elections, Vučić tried to impose another lockdown which was a reason for massive protests against the current situation in the country, both in terms of managing the virus as well as the elections held under questionable conditions.

Declaring the state of emergency was, many argue, not necessary, since Serbian constitution contains already legislature covering emergency situation, which includes working Parliament. In the report of the EU Parliament, it is noted that some governments have used the state of emergency as an excuse to implement controversial laws that endanger freedom of expression or are unrelated to the fight against COVID-19³⁸¹. Considering this, Serbia would fit quite well in the Union. On the other side, while all National Assemblies of EU National states met during the pandemic, the Parliament of Serbia was released and did not meet for the entire 44 days.

All decisions were taken by President Vučić, although he has no mandate under the constitution to introduce and revoke such measures³⁸². The governing elite, with Vučić leading

³⁸⁰ Istinomer (2020): Six false statements by Serbian government officials on COVID-19.

³⁸¹ European Parliament (2020): Coronavirus: EU increases action against disinformation.

³⁸² Burazer, Nikola/ Ivković, Aleksandar/Cuckić, Nikola/Muminović, Emina (2020): Serbian election 2020. Erosion of Trust in the Democratic Process. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. P.6.

the show, instrumentalized the corona crisis for political purposes – raising popularity before the elections. The methods were usual, but the frequency was stunning. Often criticized was the ongoing functionary campaign, where there were daily events with the President presented on the pro-government media as the main actor and a generous helper, the hero that saves Serbian people from the bad virus. If sometimes, Vučić himself couldn't make it to show up on one event, some of his party officials did, with obligatory praise of the Presidents skills, his working habits, his dedication, in short: a cult of a leader is being built. Vučić was the one delivering medical equipment to villages and hospitals, receiving international human aid at the airport, and all this in front of dozens of cameras. These reportages were almost the only thing one could see constantly on TV and read in the press since the opposition was locked down due to the state of emergency. As soon as the state of emergency was released, Vučić held a virtual rally where he talked to a few dozen screens and received applause. Democracy is a dialog and this virtual rally is a good illustration that the true dialog does not exist. There can be only Vučić's monologue, and in a break, the other side must reply with applause. Similarly, as in the Parliament, when the chairman uses the bell that usually serves to calm murmur, to signal when the ruling majority to vote in favor, there is recorded applause which is played during a break in the President's speech³⁸³.

6.2 Media monitoring and role of REM during the state of emergency and electoral campaign

In the chapter 4, section 4.2.2 Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media REM we analyzed REM's role and its contribution to the current media framework, which, this section became even more obvious – these elections were held in an unusual circumstances, when gatherings were prohibited, and consequently, power and focus was on online campaigning, in the first line TV, social media, media portals. REM, as we discussed above, already showed its weakness in terms of institutional independence, but in the context of corona pandemic, it once more became obvious that this institution is subordinated to the ruling elite, and not the law.

Even though media freedom was one of the main points of the dialog facilitated by the European Parliament between the ruling elite and the opposition, the results of the media monitoring in the following months were a personification of manipulation on many levels. During the state of emergency and the election campaign, a large degree of media abuse, and the absence of pluralism were observed. According to the media monitoring of the Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) media monitoring, in the period of the state of emergency (15.03 to 6.05), “the members of the ruling party dominated the content of

³⁸³ See Rujević, Nemanja (2017): *Disciplina poslaničke kičme*. In: Deutsche Welle.

nationally-covered television programs, taking up 91 percent of the time devoted to political actors in primetime on *RTS 1*, *Prva*, *Pink*, *Happy* and *B92*”³⁸⁴.

Transparency Serbia monitored the period of the election campaign and the state of emergency together. Aleksandar Vučić was, according to their findings, the most dominant actor, appearing 324 times, 275 in a positive context, 20 in a neutral and 29 in a negative one. The person with the second most appearances was Dragan Đilas, opposition leader, with a total of 102 front pages, but with 90 in a negative context³⁸⁵.

REM, a democratic institution that shall monitor the work of electronic media, contribute to the freedom of speech, and prevent violation of the journalistic codex was recognized by the government as an important institution that can serve their goal in controlling the public sphere. In connection to this, as already discussed earlier in this thesis, REM was already not fulfilling his objectives and responsibilities stipulated in the law. However, during the pandemic, the situation in this institution worsened. REM once more acted as a prolonged hand of the SNS and Mr. Vučić. Its main task was to limit space for the opposition in the public debate, and the second one to close their eyes on violations conducted by the pro-government media and government officials. Simultaneously, there was a need from the government side to cover up the lack of democracy by printing reports that will be sent to the EU and other international actors. Aiming to fulfill this, REM came up with the new methodology to measure the presence of political actors during the official electoral campaign however, this is a very problematic aspect of the media monitoring for two reasons. The new methodology included six electronic media with national coverage that are under government control and two cable TV stations *N1* and *NovaS*, operating only on one cable operator SBB whereby *N1* is an informative TV station. The result was that the SZS Coalition for Serbia had more coverage than SNS. According to analysts, REM is comparing apples with oranges by incorporating cable TV stations into the report³⁸⁶.

Many experts criticized the electoral media monitoring of REM, especially the monitoring, that was not performed in accordance with international standards prescribed by the Venice Commission and the European Commission’s Human Rights Directorate and practices followed in election observation missions. BIRODI indicated that any mentioning of a representative of the opposition by the representatives of the ruling party was incorporated as the representation in the media, in favor of the mentioned. The context, positive, negative, or

³⁸⁴ Istomer (2020): Crta: U vanrednom stanju vlast dominantna na nacionalnim frekvencijama.

³⁸⁵ See Transparency Serbia (2020): Intenzivna funkcionerska kampanja odnela primat nad predstavljanjem izbornih lista.

³⁸⁶ See FoNet (2020): Stojanović o izveštaju REM-a: Nenormalan i urađen iskrivljenom metodologijom. In: N1.

neutral, in which the politician was mentioned was irrelevant³⁸⁷. “A person who came up with this kind of reporting shall get a doctorate in political propaganda”³⁸⁸.

6.3 Manipulation mechanisms in Serbian journalism during the pandemic

In the chapters 4 and 5, we have outlined main mechanisms autocratic elite is utilizing in order to remain in power, which result in democracy backsliding, suppressing of media freedoms, endangered safety of journalists etc. This section provides with an overview of even more repressing methods, autocratic government imposed during the state of emergency.

Polarization of the media, lack of information, hate campaigns, threats, intimidation, has become even more frequent in the weeks during the coronavirus epidemic and the state of emergency³⁸⁹. One of the cruelest ways to censor freedom of speech was the government’s decree which aimed at centralizing the information distributed to the public and to send out a message to journalists that they could end up in prison for using unofficial sources.

As already discussed in previous chapters, considering that Vučić was the Minister of Information in 1998 when the media and press were exposed to extremely restrictive law makes the situation substantially worrying. The mentioned decree led to arresting journalist Ana Lalić from the portal *NOVA.rs* portal, who reported on the lack of equipment in one hospital in Novi Sad. She was accused of causing panic and unrest. After a few days and numerous critics from domestic and international actors, the government’s conclusion was withdrawn. The reason for withdrawal, as Prime Minister explains, was not the realization that citizens have the right to be informed about events that are directly influencing their lives and the country but was done just not to give “an excuse to criticize what Serbia has done”³⁹⁰.

However, the effect stayed and almost all hospitals and medical institutions were closed for journalists’ questions. Local journalists were most affected by this fact since regular press conferences were held only in Belgrade. Many local journalists report that their questions were ignored at the local hospitals and government officials would only answer to the ‘suitable’ pro-government media, the same ones that receive huge funds from the state budget³⁹¹. Press conferences were held on a daily basis in Belgrade at the beginning of the crisis, before they were held without the press being present, with the questions being sent in advance via email.

³⁸⁷ See N1 (2020): Gavrilović o “jednom I nepostojećima” u medijima, Zekić o paravojnim REM-ovima.

³⁸⁸ N1 (2020): Stojanović: Smeta mi narativ da je izlazak na izbore borba, a bojkot odustajanje. 17:38 – 22:33.

³⁸⁹ See Rogač, Milijana (2020): Ko uskraćuje ljudima u unutrašnjosti Srbije pravo da budu informisani? In: Istomer.

³⁹⁰ See European Federation of Journalists (2020): COVID-19: Serbian Government urged to guarantee free flow of information.

³⁹¹ See Rogač, Milijana (2020): Ko uskraćuje ljudima u unutrašnjosti Srbije pravo da budu informisani? In: Istomer.

These press conferences without the press were justified by the critical epidemic situation. Many journalists have protested against this way of communication and the fact that they cannot ask sub-questions but the members of the government nor the crisis management team never answered the questions sent in advance.

“The Serbian authorities also took advantage of the situation to evade scrutiny in other, non-COVID-19-related areas: they responded to hardly any questions pertaining to other topics and said that most FOIA (Freedom of Information Act)³⁹² requests could not be dealt with until the state of emergency was over. All this formed the prelude to even stricter control of the flow of information”³⁹³.

The case of the journalist Ana Lalić exposed not only governments' attempt to centralize information but also the overused executive power. The interrogation of Lalić was accompanied by a few hours of detailed search of her entire apartment, although she immediately handed her laptop and phones. After spending the night in custody, she was released but her equipment was kept. She was fearing that her sources would be revealed, and, in that way, other medical stuff would never share any information with journalists. After she was released, Lalić started experiencing another level of harassment – intimidation, insults, and hate campaign. “Serbian Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić has accused her of spreading fake news, and the harassment went one stage further on 15 April when paid ads with her name, photo and a description of her as “Public enemy No. 1” were found on apps download from Google Play Store”³⁹⁴. A new attempt at intimidation occurred when her car tire was punctured. Lalić experienced threats and maltreatment over social media, and on the streets. Police did not react equally promptly in finding her attackers.

Ana Lalić, journalist during the pandemic tried to obtain correct and vital information of public interest and was completely constrained in various ways, humiliated by the police, harassed, and made a target of the hate campaign by the government and its officials. By looking at these events, we can perceive the challenges journalism as a profession in Serbia facing as well as media freedom, which is severely limited. This drives us to the conclusion that institutions work against the democratic system and officials at the head of the state institutions are misusing their position for their own interests. In the interest of covering up the mistakes and not taking over the responsibility for acting late or not acting at all in saving lives, implementing correct measures, etc.

³⁹² Translated to Serbian: Zakon o slobodnom pristupu informacija od javnog značaja.

³⁹³ Stojanović, Milica (2020): Serbia. Coronavirus and the media. In: European Journalism Observatory.

³⁹⁴ Reporters Without Borders (2020): Platforms urged to prevent harassment of journalists covering COVID-19.

The issue with the media and press is also double standards when it comes to pro-government and other media. It is reflected in the fact that pro-government media are rarely sanctioned for violations of the journalistic codex. The only way these media are sanctioned is if an individual initiates a legal proceeding and the court sentence the media with a fine. The problem with this procedure is a small fine defined by law that is easily paid by the media company so that it does pay off to write lies and offend opposition and other individuals considering that the funds the pro-government media get from the state are much bigger than the fines they pay sometimes.

Even during the corona crisis, there were a few extreme examples. Željko Mitrović, owner of *Pink TV* station with national coverage made videos of himself during what he called “ozone blood therapy” which he claimed would cure COVID-19. Although UNS called REM to act, one of the REM members said that Mitrović broke no law and that there will not be any sanctions against him or *TV Pink*³⁹⁵. Comparing this situation with the case of Ana Lalić, it is clear that the government is on one hand trying to control the information flow and on the other hand to cause panic in society so that they would obey and not question restrictive measures. Surely, the state institutions do not react to the violation of laws when the violation was ordered from above. A good example of the government-controlled press which is sowing panic and inflaming the situation are *Kurir* and *Informer*³⁹⁶. According to the Press Council, the Journalists' Code was violated almost three thousand times during the state of emergency³⁹⁷.

6.4 Democracy trends during pandemic

In order to grasp the influence of corona crisis on democracy, we will further discuss some key events that shaped the status of democracy in the country during the pandemic.

6.4.1 Elections during the pandemic

In order to hold the elections with a reasonable turnout, leading party officials came out with a questionable strategy. *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN)* came out with an article claiming they had seen the system that the government is using for reporting of COVID-19 cases and what they saw were much bigger numbers of both, infected and death cases than the ones reported in the days before the elections³⁹⁸.

³⁹⁵ See Beta (2020): Serbian media watchdog refuses to sanction pro-government TV. In: N1.

³⁹⁶ See BiEPAG (2020): The Western Balkans in Times of the Global Pandemic. P.7.

³⁹⁷ Press Council (2020): The Journalists' Code was violated almost three thousand times during the state of emergency.

³⁹⁸ Jovanović, Natalija (2020): Korona: Broj umrlih i zaraženih višestruko veći od zvanično saopštenog. In: Javno.

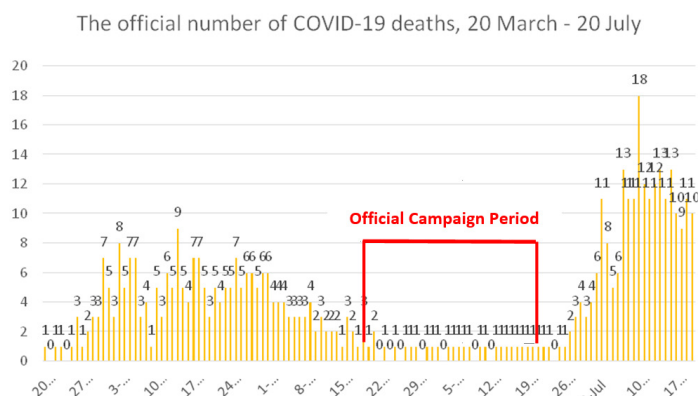


Figure 3 Official number of COVID-19 deaths

Source: Centre of Investigative Journalism of Serbia (CINS): *Coronavirus in Serbia: Daily Updates*, <https://www.cins.rs/en/coronavirus-in-serbia-daily-updates/>. Accessed on 7 August 2020.

There were speculations in the public that this was made on purpose to motivate society to vote in the elections on the 21st of June³⁹⁹. Instead of a reasonable answer, denial, or simply admitting that there were irregularities, Serbian Prime Minister Brnabić tried to justify the difference in the numbers found by *BIRN* from the official data by theorizing: “Let's say I have symptoms and I go to the Covid clinic and I get a positive result and they enroll me in the database. I'm on my way to the Infectious Diseases Clinic and a bus hits me. In that database, I died. Do you think I should be counted as the dead of COVID-19? There are X-Y such cases”⁴⁰⁰. The statistically almost impossible data on the graph below is an illustration of how governing officials dare to recklessly cover up the facts without even trying to make it look plausible. If one government is capable of lying about something so important as the lives of the citizens, what can be expected when it comes to nepotism, corruption, media freedom, human rights, protection of data, safeguarding of independent institutions, and many other aspects of a democratic state?

As a consequence of covering up the numbers of COVID-19 cases around the elections, in connections with many other political and corruption scandals, the trust in institutions downgraded⁴⁰¹. According to the ODIHR election report, “the blurring of the line between the campaign of the ruling party that put Mr. Vučić at its core and the media coverage of the president and government’s activities, including responses to the COVID-19 crisis, challenged paragraph 5.4 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document”⁴⁰². ODIHR’s report also notices that institutions, for example the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA), failed to conduct proper investigations related to campaign regulation issues and allegations of misuse of office and state resources⁴⁰³. REM also failed in completing its duties related to the media monitoring and

³⁹⁹ Janjević Darko (2020): Serbia's Vucic backs down on coronavirus curfew after Belgrade protests. In: Deutsche Welle.

⁴⁰⁰ Komarčević, Dušan/Heil, Andy (2020): Mean Streets: Serbian PM says Getting 'Hit By A Bus' Can Make You A COVID-19 Victim. In: Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty.

⁴⁰¹ Pantović, Milivoje (2020): Serbia denies hiding COVID-19 impact to push ahead with election. In: Euronews.

⁴⁰² OSCE (2020): Republic of Serbia, Parliamentary elections, 21.06.2020. P.13.

⁴⁰³ See Ibid.

sanctioning when the pro-government media were unlawfully utilized as a propaganda tool in the spreading of this campaign. The free competition was due to the state of emergency and the media control of the government, not possible. In connection with the aforementioned facts, we shall add that President Vučić was the main person leading his political party in the parliamentary campaign. The list was called *Aleksandar Vučić, for our children*, although Vučić was not on the list. Considering that he is the President and the marketing behind the electoral campaign of the ruling party signals that Serbia is not a way to become a one-party system but, rather a one-man state. Some experts explained the absurd situation about the President being the only person in the campaign for his party in the elections: “Since the electoral list of his party’s coalition will certainly enter parliament, he [Vučić] will need to talk to himself as well as part of consultations on a new government”⁴⁰⁴.

Just like the campaign, the election day was filled with irregularities. With the aim of raising the voter turnout, SNS party members were involved in numerous violations of the election process such as Bulgaria train⁴⁰⁵, keeping lists of people who voted, etc. The consequence of the campaign and the election day under such circumstances is a questionable legitimacy of the elections.

6.4.2 Protests and police brutality after the elections

Right after the elections, Vučić announced another curfew and a comeback of restrictive measures. This was a reason, on the top of debatable elections legitimacy, playing with numbers of dead and infected with coronavirus during the election campaign, poor hospitals conditions and lack of medial stuff and equipment, for angry and dissatisfied people, to start a protest. Protest became violent and grew in a few days, but so did the police manpower as well as the use of force used against the demonstrators. Protests quickly spread in other cities of Serbia. We saw in many cities across the world protests, but the scenes from Belgrade and police brutality over citizens and journalists was disproportionate and raised human rights concerns⁴⁰⁶. In order to disperse crowds, police used tear gas and even the police cavalry brigade was sent to intervene. There were videos showing how police is beating up three man that were just sitting on a bench. The Council of Europe's human rights commissioner, Dunja Mijatović, raised concerns over the “violent dispersal of demonstrators” by police which endangered human rights⁴⁰⁷. Amnesty International also reacted on the scenes in Belgrade: “Images of

⁴⁰⁴ Vasović, Milenko (2020): Serbia’s Infallible Leader no Longer Needs a Party. In: Balkan Insight.

⁴⁰⁵ The term refers to when a person is bribed to submit a pre-prepared ballot paper, and then collect a second one from the polling station which they return blank to the person who paid them, as proof that they submitted the fraudulent ballot.

⁴⁰⁶ BBC (2020): Coronavirus: Serbia scraps curfew plan for Belgrade after protests.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

Serbian police firing tear gas and stun grenades indiscriminately into the crowd, and of protesters and bystanders being charged by mounted police and beaten by police in riot gear, raise serious concerns⁴⁰⁸. In addition to the excessive police brutality against the protesters, police attacks on journalists was also worrying. Some journalists were disabled to report, when their equipment was thrown to the ground, and some were beaten up by the police, even though they provided with a press legitimation⁴⁰⁹. Although violence was condemned by number of international organizations, Serbian politicians and minister of Interior was holding side of the police by saying that police acted in self-defense⁴¹⁰.

6.4.3 Corona diplomacy

The outbreak of COVID-19 was used not just to weaken the democratic institutions and rising in popularity but also for getting attention from big international players. In order to justify restrictive measures based on China's authoritarian model and to be able to criticize the EU, Serbia instrumentalized Chinese support⁴¹¹. The influence of China has been rising for a few years now, but since the virus spread to Europe, President Vučić praised China for help and concluded that the European solidarity was a fairytale that does not exist⁴¹². RTS, the public broadcaster, carried live coverage of Chinese aid, including medical supplies, equipment, and staff followed by the press conferences. The European Union struggled itself with the tensions inside the Union and reacted with delay. Several European officials emphasized the amounts of funds Serbia has received from the EU, but the critique on the overall democracy situation was not as prominent as the justification. On the other side, there are European politicians like Tusk who openly support the President despite his efforts to downgrade democracy, and freedoms European Union stands for. There is still an impression that the stabilitocracy is the main approach towards Serbia and the region of the Western Balkans although the practice has shown that it only strengthens the autocratic tendencies.

In the period when all countries were struggling to obtain vaccines, Serbian President came again to the Europe's spotlight, this time as a good example. Chinese and Russian support at the beginning of the crisis payed off, and Serbia imported and rapidly approved practically all vaccines that could be found on the market: Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, Sputnik V, AstraZeneca, and the Sinopharm. This led to having one of the highest percentages of

⁴⁰⁸ Amnesty international (2020): Serbia: Violent police crackdown against COVID-19 lockdown protesters must stop.

⁴⁰⁹ See Dragojlo, Saša (2020): Serbian Police Attack Journalists In Second Night of Clashes. In: Balkan Insight.

⁴¹⁰ See Dragojlo, Saša (2020): Serbian Police Attack Journalists In Second Night of Clashes. In: Balkan Insight.

⁴¹¹ See Vasović, Milenko (2020): Serbia's Infallible Leader no Longer Needs a Party. In: Balkan Insight.

⁴¹² See Ibid.

⁴¹² See Beta (2020): "Samo Kina može da nam pomogne, evropska solidarnost ne postoji..." In: Nedeljnik

vaccinated people in Europe and worldwide. This fact was used in populist purposes of the Vučić, portraying him as a savior of the region. He personally donated vaccines to North Macedonia, to Montenegro, to BiH and it was all followed by almost all TV stations with national coverage. In addition, pro-government tabloids were picturing these events as the heroic feat of a benefactor and a fearless leader. Due to exaptation date of the AstraZeneca vaccine and lack of interest among Serbian population, Serbia welcomed foreigners to get a vaccine for free. For a few days, thousands of foreigners were waiting in the lines on several locations in Serbia to get the free shot. With this gesture, Vučić showed that unlike the EU, which is struggling with the lack of vaccines, Serbia has so much that it can vaccinate countries from the region that are waiting for the promised help from the EU as the pandemic spreads. This was also a spread of the Chinese and Russian influence, thanks to which Serbia was able to vaccinate big percentage of population.

6.5 Discussion

The corona crisis brought significantly negative effects on democracy. Serbia experienced also before the crisis a decline of democratic principles that were criticized by numerous reports, including the ones on the progress of accession to the EU. Some of the main aspects are the lack of rule of law, clientelism, high-level corruption, misuse of public resources, lack of transparency. The crisis amplified these already existing problems. Institutions are weak and not independent, the system of checks and balances is damaged, the state is captured and run by the elite that has also criminal tights. The ruling elite with Vučić running the show, instrumentalized the pandemic, the virus itself, the state of emergency, and the international actors for their own political benefits. The electoral campaign in the middle of the pandemic turned into a functionary campaign that lacked any unbiased opposition representation in the vast majority of the media and all TV stations with the national coverage. Independent media and journalists had an extremely hard time working under the circumstances where the state was treating them as an enemy.

In this thesis we discussed the façade of democracy and found that the system in Serbia has many elements of it, but, during this crisis, even the façade has vanished. The pandemic showed that the current regime is capable of authoritarian rule, without even needing to cover up with democratic procedures. In this context, we can speak about the “corona autocracy”⁴¹³.

Institutions were forced to give up their power to the hands of a few individuals. The cruelty of the governing elite has come to the surface, as has the willingness to maintain their positions

⁴¹³ Sandić-Hadžihasanović, Gordana (2020): Džihic: Zloupotreba straha u političke svrhe. In: Radio Slobodna Evropa.

by running ‘independent’ institutions at all costs. Especially visible is the despotic tendency of President Vučić who was the main marketing person around the parliamentary and local elections. Pictures that were sent from Belgrade which recorded police brutality are a mirror of a peak of autocratic tendencies that were accumulated over years and became more obvious in the time of the pandemic. The regime of Aleksandar Vučić came to the point of no return, the façade was removed. Democracy turns out to be the collateral damage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

7 How stabilitocracy approach is mirrored in the media landscape in Serbia?

In order to understand the dynamics of the integration process from a perspective of an average Serbian media consumer, one must take note of the reactions of the government on officials EU reports. In the first years of office, SNS was mainly enjoying positive feedback from the Union.

It is only after few years that more critical reports came to Belgrade but written in a diplomatic manner and criticizing issues very generally, so again no big concerns for the ruling party.

However, when the situation became obviously much more serious, also European officials were choosing less diplomatic language to present the state of democracy and European reports about the progress. And so, in 2019 on a press conference where one such report was presented, Prime Minister openly showed her disagreement towards serious findings about suppression of media freedoms, capturing the state, lack of pluralism and balanced political life in Serbia.

Brnabić even accuse European Union of “choosing a political side” alluding that the EU took the side of the opposition which boycotted the Parliament and announced to boycott the elections in 2020. Serbia’s Prime Minister said that the European Commission 2019 report on the country’s progress toward the European integration amused her and added: “I believe that parts of the report are not facts-based, but political perceptions”⁴¹⁴. Brnabić also justified the delay in the laws adaption by accusing the parties that boycott the parliament and as an outcome, the European integration is suffering⁴¹⁵. Expecting criticism for stagnating in the EU accession process, Prime Minister stated that “whether any new chapter will be opened or not – it is not important anymore. The political situation in the EU has more influence on opening the chapters

⁴¹⁴ Ministry of European Integration Government of the Republic of Serbia (2019): J. Joksimović: Serbia has achieved more than indicated in the Report.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

than (a country's) progress"⁴¹⁶. Head of the EU Delegation to Serbia Sem Fabrizi, defended the report and said that it is objective, balanced, inclusive, and not biased⁴¹⁷. He also explained that the report only shows how the EU perceives the reform process, adding that the EU is not there to deal with politics, but to evaluate how much has been achieved in relation to certain criteria. "We are not here to apply double standards; we have just given our assessment based on a predictable methodology"⁴¹⁸.

It is worth mentioning on this place how this press conference was displayed in the media. The pattern is the same as always, the statements of the Prime Minister are broadcast several times on all channels with national coverage and the statements of European officials that are in contradiction with what the Prime Minister said are cut off. In addition, a few "independent experts" are invited to talk about this issue, who only support the Prime Minister's opinion then add on negative, discrediting allegations to the EU, accusing opposition for "snitching" and the inevitable mention of the President and his commitment to Serbia and his great sacrifice for Serbian society. This resulted in creating a distorted image of an event, replicated into the news and articles. The audience for which this show is intended does not have the opportunity, interest, time or capacity to really search for document on the website and read it, so everything that people know is exactly what is served to them several times on different TV channels and tabloids. Statements that Serbia is on the right track, that Vučić has achieved many important things for the country, yet the guys from the EU are evil and favor the political opponents of the great fighter for Serbia Vučić, so they write these horrible untruths. These, TV stations and newspapers, mainly tabloids, close to the government are feeding the autocratic order in Serbia by producing the visual identity of the despotic ruler Vučić. Such public discourse is reflected also in the report for 2020 in which the EU "expresses concern that publicly financed media outlets, often quoting office-holders, contribute to the dissemination of anti-EU rhetoric in Serbia"⁴¹⁹. Yet, the EU surely knows this and there is no visible reaction.

7.1 Outlook

Ahead of the parliamentary and local elections in 2020, European Parliament facilitated a discussion round between the government and the opposition because the country was in obvious political crisis and the opposition which was already boycotting institutions announced boycott of the upcoming elections. Main point of dispute was the media framework,

⁴¹⁶ Mojsilović, Julijana (2019): Serbia's PM says EC 2019 report on her country partly biased. In: N1.

⁴¹⁷ Ministry of European Integration Government of the Republic of Serbia (2019): J. Joksimović: Serbia has achieved more than indicated in the Report.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ European Parliament (2021): EP resolution of 25 March 2021 on the 2019-2020 Commission reports on Serbia.

disproportionate representativeness of the ruling party and its leader Vučić in comparison to the opposition party as well as questionable independence of REM. We have already mentioned it earlier in this thesis, on the request of the ruling party, members of REM resigned, and shortly after, new ones were elected, this however, was just a façade, since 2 members are not sufficient to make any substantial changes in this institution. In addition, Serbian government, under the excuse of changing the law as a consequence of the dialog made changes to “vital elements of the electoral system without a prior public debate and only a few months before the elections”⁴²⁰. One such changes that contradict the good practice was lowering the electoral threshold from 5% to 3% although this was not requested by the opposition. By doing this, ruling party tried to camouflage the political crisis and at least seemingly alleviate the unrepresentativeness of the opposition and smuggle in one of its satellite parties into Parliament.

This dialog was also characterized by hypocrisy of the regime, which on one side is willing to make certain concessions for the sake of democracy and at the same time there is a smear campaign in the tabloids against Tanja Fajon, representative of the EP (see also chapter Tabloidization) who speaks publicly and in Serbian language about the bad situation in respect of democracy in the country. It is also an indicator of how the façade democracy regime works, surreptitiously and insidiously. European Union failed to provide adequate protection against such regime-instrumentalized attacks on their own incumbent.

Today, one year after this negotiation we can say that the EU has failed again. According to the report of Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the election in 2020 is the most controversial in the last 20 years⁴²¹. This report concludes that the European Parliament mediation was unsuccessful⁴²². New round of dialog started in March 2021, butt was then re-named into a preparatory round of two months after which the actual dialog between the government and the opposition shall start. This request came from the EU. Serbian expert community is rather pessimistic when it comes to expecting concrete improvement of the political climate and electoral process as well as media freedoms. This is connected not only with the EU ability or Vučić ’s aims to preserve control but also with the fact that the opposition is fragile and consists of multiple parties unable to make an agreement about a common approach.

Newly adapted Serbia’s progress report from March 2021 that is reflecting 2019 and 2020 of the European Parliament recognized and demanded not just general respecting of the law and judiciary but named crucial court proceedings, investigations and affaires of the highest state

⁴²⁰ Burazer, Nikola/ Ivković, Aleksandar/Cuckić, Nikola/Muminović, Emina (2020): Serbian election 2020. Erosion of Trust in the Democratic Process. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. P.6.

⁴²¹ See Ibid. P.4.

⁴²² See Ibid. P.4.

officials to be resolved, as well as the old case Savamala. Some experts indicate that this report is showing a sharper tone of the Union on the capturing state by Vučić and announce also tougher approach in the future. The concrete cases that were included in the report with amendments are Krusik, Jovanjica, Telekom Srbija⁴²³. This report underlined the importance of free media and called MPs to follow the Code of Conduct in respect of hate speech:

“Stresses that abusive language, intimidation and slandering campaigns against political opponents and representatives of the media carried out by MPs in the plenary of the National Assembly represent a breach of democratic practice and fundamental democratic values that should be strongly condemned and sanctioned in line with the rules of procedure; is appalled by the recent orchestrated attacks carried out by several MPs and pro-government tabloids against investigative journalists and members of civil society, including those from the independent media network KRIK and NGOs such as CRTA and the Open Parliament, portraying them as associates of organized criminal groups and as coup plotters, which is in gross violation of their own recently adopted Code of Conduct for MPs”.

Serbian ruling elite did not like the concretization in the report, and it caused sharp and undiplomatic reactions. Vučić said the EP MEPs “are lost in time and space” as “they must have read some kind of report for 2011, not 2021,” and claimed the report on Serbia’s progress towards EU accession adopted by Parliament on Thursday is filled with “blatant lies”⁴²⁴. And while the EU is demanding from Belgrade to deliver “convincing results” in areas such as freedom of expression, fight against corruption and organized crime and judiciary, President Vučić is accusing EU member state of the same. He also promised to launch “large-scale European action against the theft of Jewish property in Slovenia”, for which he blamed Slovenian MEP Tanja Fajon, who is supposed to mediate the upcoming talks between Serbia’s government and the opposition⁴²⁵. Ivica Dačić, speaker of the National Assembly announced that the Parliament would issue a response to this report, a practice that was started recently with a reply to the Freedom House and an established practice we can see in Hungary⁴²⁶.

Although, this report does note concretely most concerning affairs, still, the key messages from Brussels is that the dialog between Pristina and Belgrade shall continue and that Serbia shall turn to EU instead of Russia, China and United Arab Emirates. EU is focused on formal compliance – while the true democratic principles were subordinated by the elites in a manner which EU bureaucracy could not timely detect and develop swift strategies to combat new form of rising authoritarianism. European Union is working under strict rules, and the counterparty in Serbia is formal radical, warmongering political party.

⁴²³ See European Parliament (2021): EP resolution of 25 March 2021 on the 2019-2020 Commission reports on Serbia.

⁴²⁴ Euractiv (2021): Vučić calls EU Parliament report on Serbia ‘blatant lies’.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ See Ibid.

Will the European Union manage to find mechanisms that work against the façade democracy and step out of bureaucratic formalities on paper, since the law is not a problem for longer period of time? The fact is that from 2012 onwards, the European integration process of Serbia has become unrelated to progress in democratization⁴²⁷. The European Union and many of its members states have been tolerating authoritarian practice, some out of persuasion, some out of inertia and some out of laziness⁴²⁸. It is about time to change this dynamic and start calling a spade a spade and act accordingly.

8 Conclusion

This thesis dealt with freedom of media and democracy. In particular, we analyzed the case of Serbian media transition with a special focus on the timeframe from 2012 until 2021, i.e. since Serbian Progressive Party came to power. To this end, in our analysis, we conducted extensive literature survey, looked at different indexes such as Reporters Without Borders and we conducted expert interview with Serbian journalist and director of a media outlet Slobodan Georgiev. Finally, we have conducted a qualitative analyses of tabloid print media in Serbia in particularly focusing on the most important events in the above-mentioned timeframe. We made an overview of manipulation mechanisms used by the autocratic elite and served through the tabloids. Next, we discuss most important findings.

We have selected the media sphere to be an example how the de-democratization is taking place, since the media is one of the dominant aspects of the democracy, but also one of the main spheres that are being actively manipulated by the authoritarian leaders. According to Levitsky and Way, media is one of the four arenas of democratic contestation. To be able to provide a qualitative in-dept analysis, in this thesis, we have decided to focus solely on media⁴²⁹. Serbian media framework is characterized with a problem of mediatization, spectacularization and increasing tabloidization which is combined and influenced by authoritarian practices. Media is one of the most endangered aspects and it suffered a major transition, which best illustrates the process of de-democratization of Serbia. In a broader context, Serbia is one of candidate countries for EU membership and as such, it is obliged to adhere to EU's main principles related to democracy standards and human rights. One of the core principles of EU is democracy and freedom of media, we have analyzed Serbia's accession process and tried to see what kind of influence the EU integration process has on freedom of media in Serbia.

⁴²⁷ See BiEPAG (2017): *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion*. P.93.

⁴²⁸ See Ibid. P.95.

⁴²⁹ See Levitsky, Steven/Way, Lucan (2002): *The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism*.

Democratic backsliding became obvious after people, who were Milosević's collaborators in the 1990s took political wheel in 2012. Since 2012 when SNS came to power and especially 2014, since Aleksandar Vučić became a Prime Minister, Serbia suffers from an increasing democratic deficit. Despite that, the accession process towards the EU is formally going forward, but it does not correlate with the process of democratization in Serbia. What is more, attraction of liberal democracy is in decline throughout Europe, but also worldwide where many countries are experiencing a "democratic rollback"⁴³⁰.

Further, we provide historical and comparative analysis of the media landscape in Serbia. In particular, we demonstrate how media reforms, when finally happened, mainly remained a dead letter on paper. Such proforma changes in media laws and their practical misuse reveal Serbia's democratic façade. The façade is not only connected to the media law changes, but also with a general abuse of laws and selective application thereof, whenever this suits the governing elites. For example, the government finances and supports its loyal media and marginalizes the critical ones. What is more, other state institutions, such as tax inspection, are used to intimidate critical journalists and media.

In support of the above, also reports of the Anti-Corruption Council provide a good illustration of elements of captured state. In case of media sphere, the most relevant one is REM. Instead of protecting the public interest, using legal measures to fight against violence, abusive language on the television channels with national coverage, REM skips to sanction or even notice when pro-government media break the law. Unfortunately, REM exercises pressure and issues warnings and reports for the media, such as cable TV, that are not even under their competence. This leads many experts to the claim that also REM is a propaganda weapon in the hands of Aleksandar Vučić and a link in a chain of captured institutions with a democratic façade.

Moreover, we provide an extensive analysis and underlying proofs that the autocratic governing has a devastating influence on media also from a financial perspective. There are various pressures on the media, which reports critically about the government. Such pressures range from economic pressure to death threats. "Money flows aren't determined by the market, and the money goes to media outlets according to political criteria, with a clear bias toward media that back the authorities"⁴³¹. The facts about the mechanism of financial control showed that the media are merely a propaganda tool for both the government and the owners of capital or sellers of goods. Although, the media is created as a tool for citizens to hold the government

⁴³⁰ See Günay, Cengiz/Dzihić, Vedran. (2016). Decoding the authoritarian code: exercising 'legitimate' power politics through the ruling parties in Turkey, Macedonia and Serbia. P.543.

⁴³¹ Media Sustainability Index 2019.

accountable, in practice, it is the state who controls the media and also the public opinion. One of the ways the media is blackmailed into submission is by imposing restrictions regarding the access to the advertising market and state funds. For example, if the media criticize the government, everything will be done to decrease its reach, destroy its reputation, and make the media and the journalists financially unstable and completely dry them out of any income.

In order to impose control over the public opinion, governing elites use public companies. One of examples includes the Telekom, which is used to take over the market share of the media outlets that have no ties with the government. At the same time, Vučić and other high officials of Serbian government publicly attack these media outlets and intent to damage their reputation and make the spread of the government influence faster. This strategy, that any dissonant voice must be shut down is one of the clearest indicators of limited media freedom, media pluralism and danger that will increase in the nearest future.

We further clearly argue presence of parallel realities in today's Serbia. Just before the presidential elections in 2017, covers of almost all daily newspapers were bought by Vučić and contained initials AV⁴³². Back then, the Prime Minister was criticized to having used his position to influence the media and demonstrate its power in such an obvious way. Today, this is perceived as the beginning of the new media transition – the transition towards singularity of opinion. At the time of writing this thesis, every TV station with national coverage and majority of local TV stations interrupted their program to broadcast two hours press conference of Vučić. To make thing even worse the press conference depicted dead bodies of young man who died in a criminal gangs' wars. The aim of the press conference was to show how successfully the state is fighting organized crime as well as to reveal that some high officials of SNS and the state are connected to one criminal gang. Between the incident with the newspaper covers' ahead of the presidential elections in 2017 and 2021 when a citizen can choose to watch Vučić or no TV on Saturday evening, there were 4 years of media and democratic transition. This transition was declaratively towards the EU and better legislature but in fact, it ended with the omnipresence of the despot Vučić and his success in building a **parallel reality** where the media are unified media in one voice – the voice of the regime.

The **parallel reality** is being formed and it will lead the public and society to the conclusion that the debate is still alive and more importantly, that the populist leader is permanently threatened, but remains superior and wins all imagined battles. Some scientists call this "the mediatization of politics" and describe it as the "spectacularization" of political discourse, "personalization" involving a focus on personal aspects at the expense of policies,

⁴³² RTV Šabac (2017): Vučić na skoro svim naslovnim stranama.

the “agenda shaping” power of the media to launch issues for public debate, the “fragmentation” and “simplification” of political speeches – the “sound-bite” effect – and the “winnowing”⁴³³. Serbian media framework today is a victim of too extensive mediatization of politics, which went a road from spectacularization, via agenda shaping to a destructive tabloidization. As outlined in the theoretical part of the thesis, modern democracy is often referred to as a “monitory democracy” to define the reshaping of communicational roles and change of power relations in contemporary society. Citizens are the ones that “monitor” the government with help of social media and new roles in and cultural and social changes that happened in society⁴³⁴. However, in our case of a despot country, increased control meant also to monitor the ones who are “monitoring”. And so, in 2020, Twitter has taken down around 8500 users and more than 43 million tweets which were promoting the President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party and at the same time, these accounts were tasked to attack Vučić opponents⁴³⁵. Regime of Aleksandar Vučić has its hands on everything, the legislature, elections, media and they also use state resources to manipulate public opinion, as illustrated on Twitter example. In such society, an average citizen does not have the possibility to judge based on an objective image.

Besides almost complete control of the media market, one of the main consequences of authoritarianism in the media is reflected in the ever-increasing **tabloidization**. This phenomenon turned out to be the most prominent outcome of the media transition since the democratic change in 2000. In Serbia, tabloidization evolved into something bigger and different than in most of other countries. In the period before 2012, tabloids were on a margin of the media sphere and did not belong to “recognized papers”, whereas now they have become favorite papers of the ruling elite and are imposed by them as the ones with the best journalists, state officials often give them exclusive interviews. This promotion of tabloid newspapers led to a dramatic change in values portrayed in the media sphere and by the society. These values and principles moved from paper to the TV and from there to the National Parliament and many other state institutions.

Following Habermas’ “public sphere”, the media positioned itself in the center of political processes, shaping the public agenda and generating the “public sphere” that is mediated⁴³⁶. Habermas recognized that the rational-critical debate cannot take place in a system

⁴³³ See Mazzoleni, Gianpietro (2014): Mediatization and Political Populism. In: Esser F., Strömbäck J. (eds) Mediatization of Politics. Palgrave Macmillan, London. P.34.

⁴³⁴ See Keane, John (2013). Communicative abundance. In Democracy and Media Decadence. P. 47-48

⁴³⁵ See Bush, Daniel (2020): Stanford Internet Observatory.

⁴³⁶ See Habermas Jürgen (1991): The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. P.247

where a narrow circle of politicians, media, advertisers influence the public through media via official statements, speeches, and declarations⁴³⁷. Comparing this theoretical perspective with the current practice, the term “public” in the current system of control of the tabloid content and the spreading of the tabloidization seems obsolete. Rather it can be described as a “manipulative sphere” of the media-political business interests. In today's Serbia, the term tabloidization means not only sensationalist reporting, but also single-minding, bias, sowing fear, glorifying stupidity and control, blackmail, suppression of critical thinking, favorite weapon of the ruling elite in fight against opponents and dissidents.

Autocratic government does not care about restrictions on freedoms, nor does it care about objectively informing the society. Therefore, by accepting tabloid strategies in politics it influences the collapse of journalistic values by promoting tabloids and their values by almost equating them. In today's system in Serbia, **the autocratic government is instrumentalizing the tabloids in the service of promoting its own policies and dealing with political and non-political dissidents**. Through tabloids it is being imposed that freedom of speech is reserved only for those who share current governments views. Autocratic abuse of power and manipulations strategies through media happen by producing content of fictional wars and other conflicts placed through mainly puppet tabloids.

Similar to other autocratic countries, rulers are trying to make **democratic institutions meaningless** and to waken the system. In Serbia, this is the case also with the National Assembly. Scheduled topics are being ignored, instead, smear campaigns against political opponents as well as everyone who would publicly disagree with the government policy are happening. This matters for the media sphere because it is the source of information and the stories being disseminated through the media. The Parliament de facto lost its purpose, it is now a frontrunner among institutions that constitute mimicking democracy system.

Main **mechanisms of the illiberal toolbox**, we found during the research can be put as follows: a combination of financial pressure, abuse of law, smear campaigns, physical attacks, capturing state to exert additional pressure (security intelligence, judicial insecurity, tax inspections), hiring bots to create a different image of public perception and finally marginalization and delegitimization of critical media by not giving interviews to these media nor appear in their program. There are several direct visible outcomes of such illiberal mechanisms and autocratization of Serbia, which are reflected in the media: 1) An increased tabloidization of media, both print and TV; 2) A tabloidization of the state; 3) Public sphere narrowing by the propagation of tabloids; 4) Disappearing social dialogue; 5) And suffocating

⁴³⁷ See Ibid P.247.

freedom of media and speech; 6) Rise of physical attacks and intimidation of journalists. These are followed by many indirect consequences such as: 1) Confused, apathetic and disinformed society; 2) Atmosphere of fear; 3) Wrong and immoral values are adopted in society; 4) Self-censorship spread from media to the level of the individual in society; 5) And concept of the captured state is becoming prominent. In such circumstances of using illiberal tools to monopolize public discourse, it is impossible to come to the objective and unbiased information, from media, government, via the President to the Parliament. All institutions and the media act in synergy, whereby dissonant voices are being stifled and the current narrative imposed by Vučić has zero tolerance to criticism. Finally, such narrative is transferred from the public sphere to a broader society.

Media in Serbia are deeply polarized. On the one hand, there is a majority supporting the President Vučić, financed directly or indirectly by the state, whose one of main tasks is to delegitimize and slander minority of critical media that strive to survive financially under given circumstances. Besides Serbian citizens, in professional terms, one of the victims of the described authoritarian strategies is undoubtedly journalism as a profession. The public sphere has vanished from Serbian journalism. Mainstream journalism is down to a lapdog role: instead of protecting the public interest journalism has become a profession of blindly serving the centers of political and economic power⁴³⁸. Safety of independent journalists is an issue in Serbia. Besides being attacked in an organized and planned way, journalists are also victims of attacks by random people who believe in the accusations and lies they hear on TV from the state officials or read in the tabloids. This all is, at least partly, a consequence of tabloidization, bias journalism and polarization of media because they were put as targets of the ruling elite in smear campaign and also often intimidated.

We analyzed democracy and media freedom trends during the global pandemic as well as main manipulation mechanisms the government reached out to exert more control over the state and society. Compared to the world and regional trends, democracy experienced a decline and the authoritarian methods and strategies rose to the levels where we no longer see the façade on the democracy. Journalists were arrested, government imposed restrictive legislation regarding the information flow, human rights were violated, and Serbian President used the corona diplomacy to build closer ties to the eastern partners and in some aspect show that EU's blackmailing potential has decreased. With the protests after the elections and police violence, regime of Aleksandar Vučić reached the point of no return. People are being arrested because

⁴³⁸ See Radoja, Žarka et al. (2020): *Integritet u novinarstvu – razgovori sa novinarkama i novinarima iz zemalja Zapadnog Balkana*. Centar za kulturnu dekontaminaciju. P.25.

of their tweets, activists because of the slogans against the President and police was beating up random people sitting on a bench in the nights of the massive protests. The global pandemic was used as a perfect excuse to flirt with East and the West, and the image of the EU was further damaged throughout the loyal media, while staying officially pro-EU. Vaccines are used for this purpose to show how the EU is not a real friend and on the other side, China and Russia are.

Despotic rule of Aleksandar Vučić made Serbian media transition to the place they haven't been since the nineties. Back then, political system in Serbia was described as a semi-authoritarianism and this thesis provides proofs of a return to it. Yet, Serbia today is on the road to become a member state of the European Union. Serbia's integration process was predominantly influenced by **stabilitocracy approach does not have a positive influence on the freedom of media in Serbia**, in contrary, **integration process became unrelated to the process of democratization**.

Façade democracy and parallel realities exist only when they are legitimized from the outside. Therefore, the importance and the responsibility for the current developments of the EU and other international actors is great. This type of authoritarianism uses a strategy of adapting to new conditions from the outside and creating short term goals aiming to suppress freedoms and impose singularity in public discourse. This strategy is adapted by other authoritarian leaders as well, regardless of the topic – media legislation vs. actual control, or declarative pro-European rhetoric vs. signing contracts with Russia and China.

If Hungary was a test to challenge EU's ability to find right mechanisms to protect democracy and European values in a rush of camouflaged authoritarian methods, then the EU has miserably failed. European administration was unable to target illiberal tolls such regimes are using, and the question is if there is an effective strategy to do this for the candidate countries. Because, welcoming another country with a competitive authoritarian model of government into the Union is certainly not a good strategy, but letting it over to eastern competitors might sound even more dangerous. However, the concept of **stabilitocracy** proved to be a bad strategy as well and a strategy that **enabled rise of authoritarian leaders in the first place**.

“Overall, the repertoire of authoritarian manipulation, with its mix of ‘innovative’ sophisticated tools and old, rather ‘blunt’ instruments, makes for a formidable threat to new

democracies in the context of global democratic recession”⁴³⁹. It will take a lot of effort on the global level to find right mechanisms and tools to combat such adaptive regimes.

In terms of future work, the bond between the government and the media and the rising tabloidization could be analyzed with quantitative methods too in order to provide a more detailed picture of the growing and worrying tendency. Another direction of possible next steps is to analyze remaining three arenas of democratic contestation, the legislature, the judiciary and the electoral arena in order to have a complete image of autocratizing process of democratic system. Hopefully, liberal democracies will find right democratic methods to beat new autocracies, prevent despots to obsessively control institutions and to bring back the public sphere into the spotlight of the media.

⁴³⁹ Vladislavljević, Nebojša/Krstić, Aleksandra/Pavlović, Jovica (2019): *Communicating Power and Resistance in Democratic Decline: The 2015 Smear Campaign against Serbia’s Ombudsman*. P.20.

9 Abstract

Serbia is an official candidate for membership in the European Union since 2014. At the same time, according to all international indexes, freedom of media and democracy are decreasing. When did this backsliding start, how has been developing, what are the main drivers and finally how does it reflect on the integration process in the EU?

In order to evaluate the trend of media in Serbia, we analyze media transition with a special focus on the timeframe from 2012 until 2021, i.e., since Serbian Progressive Party came to power. Further, we examine the main methods used by Serbia's governing elites to suppress media and freedom of expression. In particular, we discuss implications of the most important consequence of the aforementioned methods, which is the tabloidization of media. Finally, we look at the consequences of unfavorable development in the media sphere in the context of Serbia's European Integration process.

The analysis and the main research outcomes of this thesis are based on: i) an extensive literature survey, ii) an expert interview, and iii) a qualitative analysis of tabloid print media in Serbia. The key findings of our research is a significant increase in tabloidization, mediatization and spectacularization in the media sphere, combined with and influenced by authoritarian practices. The example of Serbia, and its media transition illustrate well the process of de-democratization. This thesis concludes that the Serbia's accession process towards EU became unrelated to the democratization process.

Keywords: Media, Democracy, Freedom of Press, Autocratization, De-democratization, Serbian media, European Integration.

Deutschsprachige Zusammenfassung

Seit 2014 werden mit Serbien offizielle Beitrittsverhandlungen für die Mitgliedschaft zur Europäischen Union geführt. Gleichzeitig nehmen in Serbien laut allen internationalen Indizes Medienfreiheit und der Demokratisierungsprozess ab. Wann hat dieser Rückschritt begonnen, wie hat er sich entwickelt, was sind die Hauptantriebskräfte und wie spiegelt er sich schließlich im EU-Integrationsprozess wider?

Um die Medienentwicklung in Serbien zu bewerten, analysieren wir den Medienwandel mit besonderem Fokus auf den Zeitraum von 2012 bis 2021, d. h. seit der Regierungsübernahme der Serbischen Fortschrittspartei. Darüber hinaus untersuchen wir die wichtigsten Methoden der serbischen Regierungseliten zur Unterdrückung der Medien und der Meinungsfreiheit. Insbesondere diskutieren wir Implikationen der maßgeblichen Konsequenzen dieser Methoden, nämlich die Tabloidisierung von Medien. Schließlich betrachten wir die Folgen einer demokratiepolitisch rückschrittlichen Entwicklung im Medienbereich im Kontext des europäischen Integrationsprozesses Serbiens.

Die Analyse und die zentralen Forschungsergebnisse dieser Arbeit basieren auf: i) einer umfangreichen Literaturrecherche, ii) einem Experteninterview und iii) einer qualitativen Analyse der Boulevardpresse in Serbien. Das zentrale Ergebnis dieser Forschung ist eine deutliche Zunahme von Tabloidisierung, Mediatisierung und Spektakelisierung im Medienbereich, verbunden mit und beeinflusst von autoritären Praktiken. Diese Arbeit kommt zu dem Schluss, dass das Beispiel Serbien und seine Medienwende den Prozess einer voranschreitenden Entdemokratisierung veranschaulicht und der Beitrittsprozess Serbiens zur EU mit dem Demokratisierungsprozess nicht mehr Schritt hält.

Schlagwörter: Medien, Demokratie, Pressefreiheit, Autokratisierung, Entdemokratisierung, serbische Medien, Europäische Integration.

10 Appendix I

Interview with Slobodan Georgiev, Director of News Max Adria, former Director of BIRN (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network)

Date: 18.11.2020 Time: 11h Place: via Microsoft Teams video

Transcript

[0:00:01-0:01:37]

A: Ja, snimam, to Vam je OK? Lakse je zbog kasnije transkripcije.

S: Sve OK.

[0:01:37-0:03:11]

A: Pa da počnemo onda, kako vama ukratko izgleda ta medijska slika u Srbiji trenutno.

S: Da, mi smo malo sebe a i publiku ugusili tim pričama poslednjih godina, međutim sada negde to je doprlo i da šire javnosti. Ja radići u BIRN-u i Vremenu još tamo negde 2013, 2014 sam video a i sa kolegama smo primetili da se dešava neka promena u oblasti medija, da se malo drugačije prave sadržaji i onda smo radili jedno istraživanje koje se ticalo rada Media buying agencija. Pokazali smo da su ovi ljudi koji su došli tada na vlast, naprednjaci, izmislili svoje Media buying agencije da bi preuzeli poslove od prvenstveno dve najveće [agencije] koje su postojale u zemlji. Jedna je da je Direct Media a druga je ova agencija koju vodi Šaper. Šaper se vrlo brzo priklonio tom pulu vlasti.

Bila su su velika ta dva sistema koje su radile Media buying, ovi [naprednjaci] su osnovali neki svoj preko agencije „Right“ koju je vodio Goran Veselinović, i danas je vodi, to je čovek blizak Vučiću. Mi smo tu pokazali šta se desilo, ti veliki neki klijenti su presli sa jednog mesta na drugo.

[0:03:12-0:04:28]

S: Ako ste pročitali, videli ste. Dešava se promena na nivou novca i to je bila prva prva stvar. Tako da je vrlo brzo Vučić sa svojom ekipom uspeo da kontroliše novac na medijskom tržištu. Kada vi kontrolišete novac na medijskom tržištu, dakle prvo kontrolišete onaj novac koji dolazi iz države a onda kroz Media buying agencije i onaj novac koji postoji na nekom tržištu vi zapravo možete snažno da utičete na medijsku scenu. I on je zapravo to je uradio i na taj način je preuzeo zapravo taj mainstream, medijski meinstrim. To je jedna stvar. Druga stvar je bila da se pokupuju sve lokalne televizijske stanice tako da vi danas kad pogledate kroz Srbiju, vi imate jedan glas. Eto tako da kažem najjednostavnije. Sve je to isto, sve te televizije takozvane lokalne su iste, programi su isti. Oni čak ponekad kada recimo se zadesite negde u Srbiji i gledate recimo lokalne kanale, i ako se zadesite u periodu kada Vučić daje neki intervju, kao sto je bio pre neki dan na Happy televiziji onda sve te lokalne stanice preuzimaju taj signal i one emituju.

[0:04:28-0:05:50]

S: Tako da vi onda menjate kanala i vidite isti program na svim. Ja ne znam da li postoji neki očigledniji primer od toga. S druge strane RTS naravno vrlo brzo je poklekao, bez obzira što oni kazu da to ne rade, da nisu takvi. Nije se dogodilo istoriji RTS-a, dakle nije u vreme Tita, ni u vreme Miloševića ni u ničije vreme, da neki funkcioner preuzme ceo program, a Vučić je to nekoliko puta uradio. Dešavalo se po 30 minuta bude u programu koji inače traje 30 minuta. Tako da ja mislim da mi nema tu šta da objašnjavamo, toliko je primera.

A: Znači, po Vama je Vučić glavni krivac za trenutnu medijsku sliku?

S: Da, on ustvari misli da je to realno. On će vam reći da to nije tačno, da ove takozvane druge strane koje nema naravno, isto tako ima mnogo. Evo sad recimo nova argumentacija koje se koristi je to da Junajted medija ima brojne svoje kanale, odnosno ima dva ovaj svoja kanala na kojima postoji informativni program, možda će biti i treći ako ga napravimo, dakle News Max, to ćemo još videti.

Ali hoću da kažem, to su kablovski kanali i on tu upoređuje sa periodom kad je bio u opoziciji.

[0:05:51-0:07:26]

S: Kada je govorio: a evo kad smo mi bili u opoziciji imali smo samo KCN, što ustvari govori o tome kako on razume medije. Dakle, ova vlast razume medije kao instrument u rukama vlasti. Ili instrument u nečim drugim rukama, to nikada nije instrument u rukama javnosti za šta se mi, nas 150 koliko nas ima u Srbiji preživelih novinara zalažemo.

A: Sa druge strane, institucije su to dozvolile. Gde su te institucije bile i pre nego što je Vučić došao na vlast? I ja bih sada želela da utičem nekako ali prosto to nije nije možda moguće. Ili Vi biste rado nešto promenili, ali postoje zato što postoje institucije koje bi trebalo da obavljaju svoj posao.

S: Pa ne naravno, dakle nije to sad, ovaj [Vučić] je došao i preuzeo na silu. Gluposti, postavio je teren koji je bio pripremljen to jedna stvar. Druga stvar, dakle institucije su tu kad ih pitate, svi su sve radili kako treba. Nema nikavbih problema.

[0:07:26-0:08:41]

S: I sve ovo što ja sad vama govorim, to ustvari nema nikakve veze zato što formalno taj čovek [Vučić] on nema nikakve direktne veze kao ni sa kim nego sve ovo što govorimo to su posledni, što bi rekli na sudu, posredni dokazi. On [Vučić] nigde naravno nije zaveden kao vlasnik bilo kakvog medija ali je činjenica recimo da je njegov partijski drug kupio, pre dve godine 2 televizije sa nacionalnom frekvencijom koje su i pre toga bile u prekršaju. Po zakonu nije smelo da jedna kompanija ima dve ima dve televizija, ali je dato tom grku u tom trenutku 2009-2010 godine iz nekih razloga i to je to. Dakle mi imamo tu cenu tavu kakva jeste i sad, kako da kažem, ispada da je eto najveći problem u Srbiji. Tako ispalo zato što ovi ljudi koji se bune protiv toga su bili zaista dosta glasni. Mislim da smo bili dosta glasni zato što je nemoguće zamisliti normalno uređenu demokratsku zemlju bez slobodnih medija. Slobodni su mediji koji imaju koliko-toliko sposobnosti i mogućnost da samostalno uređuju svoj program, a ne da čekaju naredbe iz kabineta ili drugih centara moći.

[0:08:41-0:10:37]

A: Htela sam da Vas pitam, pošto ste spomenuli Šapera i Direct medij-u, to znači da je i pre nego što je Vučić došao na vlast, postojao, uslovno rečeno, monopol na tom tržištu oglašavanja.

S: Jeste.

A: Mehanizmi su možda bili isti, samo je danas...

S: Vi danas imate situaciju da... recimo, Kurur je godinama unazad ponavljao da njima Đilas duguje pare. I danas danas imate situaciju da Željko Mitrović isto to govori. Da te agencije njima nisu dale toliko novca koliko je trebalo. O čemu se tu zapravo radi? Dakl,e u vreme kada su demokrate bile na vlasti, period zapravo u koaliciji sa socijalistima od 2008 do 2012 godine, kada su imale najveći uticaj. Kada su ove dve kompanije koje su u vlasništvu Đilasa i Šapera imale presudan uticaj na to *media buying* tržište, oni stvarno verovatno nisu davali najviše novca Kuriru. Ali znate šta, to vam je logika brojeva. Po meni to isto, može da dođe i Pornhub danas, koji recimo najgledaniji sajt u Srbiji, i da kažem molim vas pa zašto banere ne stavljate kod nas? To ljudi najviše gledaju. Znate, to je to je ta vrsta argumentacije, po meni to je besmisleno. Pa da, naravno da neću da dam kod tebe oglase zato što ne

želim uopšte da se ti bendovi vezuju za takvu vrstu sadržaja. Po meni je to potpuno bilo potpuno bilo opravdano.

[0:10:35-0:11:46]

Oni su vodili stalno rat recimo sa Blicem. Blic je bio problematičan, kao sva se lova daje njima i tako dalje. Ali hoću da kažem, bez ikakvog opravdanja za to što su radili, mi smo u BIRN-u radeći bili čini mi se jedini koji su izveštavali recimo tome na koji način je grad Beograd koji je vodio Đilas prosipao pare iz budžeta na razne gluposti, na raznu propagandu. Na izvestaje medijske agencije i tako dalje. Tako da imam mislim da imam potpuno pravo i da govorim o tome danas jer često kažu kao: „A gde ste vi bili onda?“ Eto tu sam bio. Znači, ja sam i tad to radio. Ja sam i tad imao s njima problema ali to ne može da se uporedi naravno sa sa ovom situacijom.

A: A u čemu je ključna ta razlika između tada mislim jer očigledno da su postojali slični ili isti mehanizmi u odnosu na danas.

S: Ključna razlika je u činjenici da je ona vlast nije razumela vlast kao sudbinsku stvar, nego se verovalo zaista da smo mi izašli iz tog perioda, dakle da je OK i da padneš s vlasti. Znate, znači mi smo imali jednu smenu vlasti 2004 godine u martu.

[0:11:46-0:13:08]

Imali smo najnormalniju, civilizovanu predaju. Došao je Vojislav Koštunica u kabinet, sačekao ga je Zoran Živković, tadašnji premijer, koji je nasledio ubijenog Đinđića. On mu je rekao: „Evo, to je tvoj kabinet, ovo preuzimaš.“ Znači, najnormalnije. Dakle, potpuno jedna mirna nijedna normalna civilizovana stvar. Kao što smo imali 2004, pa smo istu stvari imali i 2008 godine. Dakle, nikakvih sukoba nije bilo, nikakvog rata, nikakve odmazde, znate. A kada su ovi ljudi [naprednjaci] došli na vlast 2012 godine, oni su zapravo krenuli sa odmazdom. Oni [naprednjaci] su krenuli sa nekim svojim postupkom povratka na, ne znam u šta, u koji sistem i sad kad pogledate ovih 8 godina, znači 8 godina služi da se pokaže da prethodnih 12 godina je bilo najgorih 12 godina u istoriji Srbije. Naravno to je apsolutna laž, APSOLUTNA LAŽ i tu mi nemamo, oni kažu da raspravljamo, šta da raspravljamo? Vi ste bili u vlasti '99, 2000. Kada ste pali sa vlasti, ova zemlja nije postojala. Nije bila u Ujedinjenim Nacijama, ljudi nisu primali plate, nisu imali struju, nije bilo vode, znači ulica, saobraćaja, ničega nije bilo. Razumete?

[0:13:08-0:14:17]

Ti [Vučić] kad si došao na vlast 2012 godine, ova zemlja ide nekim svojim putem. Iako naravno ima svoje probleme kao i svaka druga zemlja, ali najnormalnija zemlja [Srbija] na putu za Evropu, sa pasošima, sa ljudima koji mogu da putuju svuda, sa omladinom koja može da studira, da ide da radi šta god hoće. Znači, tu ogromna razlika napravljena naravno, tih 12 godina. A ovi ljudi koji su došli na prevaru, na lažnu priču o promenama zapravo koriste medije i to je jedina stvar. Znate, vi ste mogli da se suprostavite Tadiću, mogli ste se suprostavite Đilasu, mogli ste se suprotstavite kome hoćete, ne bi Vam zbog toga falila dlaka s glave. Oni bi Vas možda ignorisali, možda ne bi hteli da vas pozovu na neki događaj koji prave pa bi vi morali da jurite da saznate kad se šta dešava i tako dalje.. ali to je bilo to. Da te nazove potencijalno čovek koji radi medije u kabinetu gradonačelnika i kaže: „ej kao a što vi to radite?“ I ti mu kažeš: „Druže, radim zato što je to moj posao, doviđenja.“

A: Znači ipak je bilo takvih poziva?

S: Blo je, ali kažem, to je bilo na tom nivou.

[0:14:18-0:15:57]

Nije u tome stvar. Znači nije onda kada ti njega oteraš, nisi ti narednih 15 dana bio na naslovnim stranama nekog tabloida gde se govorilo o tome kakav si ti lopov, kako si izdao zemlju, kako si ukrao

pare, kako ti je žena kurva. Ne znam šta sve nisu price. Tako da je to ogromna, ogromna razlika. Da li je seme neko posejano ranije? Da, jeste. Ovaj čovek koji vodi Informer, njega je Đilas izmislio. On mu je dao novac da napravi Press. To je seme koje je tad posejano ali ovo što ovi ljudi [naprednjaci] rade je nezabeleženo. Ja sam živeo ovde, živim od rođenja, od '86 godine te sve '90 godine sam bio tu. Ljudi kažu devedesete godine, kakve devedesete. To za medijску scenu nema veze. U devedesetim, Milošević je imao svoje medije, postojali su neki drugi mediji, on nije mario uopšte za te druge. On je bio u fazonu: ja imam ovu veliku televiziju, imam velike novine, imam UDB-u, imam policiju, vojsku, vi tamo drugovi radite šta god hoćete. Kod ovog čoveka [Vučića], on insistira na tome, on insistira na podelama. [0:15:59-0:21:06]

Evo mi se skoro je bila situacija, bio sam kod Jugoslava u Pressing-u. Ja sam rekao to, kaže: „a šta vi mislite da mi se skupimo i da dođemo pred vašu televiziju?“ ja sam rekao: „zbog čega da se skupljate?“ Pa vama niko ne brani da dođete. Dakle, Vučić i danas može da dođe i na Novu (Nova S), i na N1 i bilo gde.

A: A zašto ne dolaze?

S: On ne dolazi jer zapravo želi da te delegitimiše. I sad lično ne mislim uopšte da je on bitan. E, moram da imam Vučića. Ali šta se dogodilo, kako je on ustojio system: ne postoji druga osoba, razumete? I potpuno je svejedno, možete da dovedete magarca i ministra, svejedno je. Nivo odgovornosti je isti. Oni ..kako da Vam kažem, koliko taj magarac odlučuje, toliko i ovaj ministar odlučuje. Znači, ne pita se suštinski ni za šta.

A: Da, ali ni ti ministri ne gostuju.

S: Sad ću Vam reći. Mi imamo recimo komunikaciju, znamo sve te ljude, ja radim ovaj posao 20 godina, I kažem: “zašto ljudi ne dođete kod nas u program?”

Kažu: “zašto nas zovete kad znate da ne možemo da dođemo?”

A: A ne mogu jer im je zabranjeno?

S: Zabranjeno im je da dolaze, zabranjeno im je da odgovaraju na pitanja. I to je nenormalna situacija i to vlast ne sme da radi. A to oni [naprednjaci] rade zato što kažu: “vi niste u stvari mediji, vi ste instrument”. Razumete, znači, prodaju vam ono kukavičje jaje. Ono što ti radiš, govoriš da ustvari ja radim. Ja kažem: “ne družite se, ja to ne radim”. Ja sam novinar, vi ste PR službenici i bavite se marketingom, a ja se bavim novinarstvom. To je ogromna razlika i to nikad ovde nije postojalo. Ko god to relativizuje, a ima ovde kolega koji to vole da relativizuju, da kažu: “ma to je uvek isto..”. Ne, ne, nije isto. Kao što nije bilo isto kada je na vlasti bio Tadić i kada su sad na vlasti naprednjaci. Bez obzira na sve svinjarije i gluposti koje su pravili, znači to je neuporedivo. Zašto? Zato što je na Tadić bio demokrata. I on je verovao i izbore i u demokratiju i u sve te vrednosti o kojima je govorio. Ovi ljudi [naprednjaci] su varalice. Oni [naprednjaci] sa tim nemaju nikakve veze. Njih [naprednjake] to apsolutno ne zanima. I pravo je čudo da mi uopšte postojimo u takvom sistemu. Apsolutno je čudo, ja to uvek i kažem. To je to. I sada recimo, šta se dešava: većina tih medija koji nisu na primer kod uticajem vlasti, oni su recimo u okviru Junajted media (United media group). Ukoliko bi Junajted media (United media group) odlucila da se povuče iz toga, stvar bi nestala. Sve bi se svelo na tri organizacije, na BIRN, CINS I KRIK koje su donirane iz inostranstva i na 2-3 lokalna medija. To je to. Ne postoji nista. I mi svakog dana svedocimo, jel možemo da gledamo kakvi idioti vode programe i kakve programe prave na nacionalnim frekvencijama. Znači, ja stvarno ne bih imao nista protiv da se tu pojavljuju programi koji su relevantni, da se pojavljuju novinari koji znaju da rade, da oni prave pravi sadržaj. Da prave top

vesti. Da to bude, da to sve pršti. Znači, od toga nema ništa. To je sve bullshit najobecniji. Znači, jedno praznoslovlje, trabunjanje, koješta. I čeka se kad će čovek [Vučić] da se pojavi da ga pustimo 15-20-30 minuta koliko god treba, jer dokle god je on u program, rejting je dobar i to je jedino sto nas brine.

A: A htela sam da Vas pitam, ako možete da uporedite, dok ste radili u BIRN-u kao istraživački novinar I sada na televiziji. Da li postoji razlika neka u mehanizmima pritisaka vlasti. Da li ste sada ovde više izloženi nekim pritiscima, da li finansijskim da li direktinijim u odnosu na kada ste radili u BIRN-u?

S: Oni su nas stavili sve u isti koš. Tako da je sve potpuno isto. Potpuno je isti posao. Ja sam presao u drugu organizaciju zato što je to za mene bio, ono št kažz fudbaleri, veliki izazov jer kao nova stvar, hajde da vidimo da li mogu tu. Zato što ovde smo napravili šta smo napravili, to se dobro radi, ta organizacija kada sam ja tamo otisao da radim 2007 godine, nas je bilo samo nekoliko. Sada, kada sam otišao, postoje i najnormalnije rade. Moja ideja je bila da ono što rade istraživački novinari, da taj pristup zapravo probam da preselim na TV stanicu. Mislím da je to važno. Da I te vesti koje ljudi gledaju svakoga dana imaju tu vrstu potpore i takvu vrstu kredibiliteta. I da budu zaista vesti. Da budu prave priče a ne da bude prepričavanje događaja, da ponudimo ljudima neki korak dalje. Kao što sam radio ceo život i u nedeljniku Vreme i u BIRN-u. I to je to.

[0:21:07-0:26:39]

S: A što se tiče njih, dakle Vi ste videli ako ste pratili ovde cenu mi smo lets otkrili to, onu uslovno rečeno aferu sa..., zapravo praćenje računa. Mi smo na News Max-u odmah objavili prvi, dakle to što radi uprava za sprečavanje pranja novca, što je došlo sada do UN-a.

A: Da, to je sada internacionalni skandal.

S: Potpuni skandal, tako da tu nema nema nikakave promene. Dakle, business as usual, oni rade svoj posao, mi pokušavamo da preživimo i i to je to.

A: Da li se Vi u tom preživljavanju osećate bezbedno? S obzirom na broj napada, što verbalnih što fizičkih na novinare?

S: Pa ne znam šta da kažem. Meni je ta priča dosadna, ti napadi na medije, na novinare. Znače, ovaj posao je takav. Ja se nadam i molim Boga da niko od ljudi sa kojima radim i koje znam ne nastrada, kao i za sebe. I to je to. S jedne strane je to a s druge strane, pritisak je nešto na šta novinari moraju da budu rezistentni. Dakle, ako nisi rezistentan na pritisak, ne treba da se baviš novinarstvom. Ja uvek to sa ljudima razgovaram. Letos sam imao par slučajeva nekih ljudi koji su hteli da dodju da rade kod nas I nisu recimo mogli to da private. Ljudi ne mogu da private da sad njih neko zove. Da vi uradite neku priču pa sad vas neko zove da kaze: „ej, izvini , ja sam nezadovoljan, meni se ovo ne sviđa“ ili „ej, šta ste ovo radili?“ Ljudi ne mogu da istrpe. Ne mogu da vide dva tvita protiv sebe na svom akauntu ili na fejsbuku a ne da vas objave na naslovnoj strani tabloida kao što je onaj magarac pisao za mene da sam hteo da ukradem 23 miliona evra ili da sam radio za ne znam koju stranu sluzbu to ili to. To ljudi ne mogu da podnesu.

A: Jasno. Sada kada ste spomenuli twitter, šta mislite koliki je zapravo potencijal tih društvenih mreža u Srbiji trenutno, da li postoji neki prostor da se unapredi medijska scena putem društvenih mreža?

S: Ne. Ja sam apsolutno siguran da od toga nema ništa. Mediji su počeli da propadajau kada su počeli da padaju pod uticaj društvenih mreža. Misleći da su društvene mreže neka vrsta zamene ili samo druge platforme za ono što rade mediji. To apsolutno nije slučaj ni sa jednom društvenom mrežom. Društvena

mreža, kako da kažem, sve je to opisano. To je vaše neko polje, vi tu možete da objavljujete, možete da se svadjate i to je to. Mi znamo da, kao što ne može svako da bude lekar, tako ne može svako ni da bude novinar.

A: Prošle godine je twiter (Twitter) zaključao nekih 8 hiljada naloga koji se povezuju sa Srpskom Naprednom Strankom I sa Aleksandrom Vučićem, takozvani botovi. Zašto bi onda stranka koja je na vlasti toliko obraćala pažnju na socijalne mreže i uopšte stavljanje komentara na portalima raznim ako nije toliko relevantno?

S: Ovaj čovek je proterao sve ljude iole pismene I normalne iz javnosti. I onda se gomila tih ljudi pojavila na twitteru I delimično na fejsbuku. Ima I tamo I tamo. Ja recimo ne volim fejsbuk, zabranio bih ga sutra. I onda to njih nervira, to Vam kažem, imate vlast kojoj smeta sve što je drugacije. Oni to hoće ovde, to je ta vrsta unifikacije. Nas čekaju važne stvari, svi moramo da budemo kao jedan. To je bukvalno predvorje fašizma. To Vam je ona priča o snopu, ako smo svi zajedno, onda ne mogu da nas polome. To je fašizam, to je ta priča o tome. Niko to tako ne izgovara, niko se za to javno ne zalaže. Ali Vi kad slušate šta oni govore, kako govore, kako vide... znate šta, Vučić je 8 godina na vlasti, on nikad nije progovorio o demokratiji. On nikad nije progovorio o vrednostima bilo kakvim, on to priča ono kao da kupuje toalet papir. Eto, mi idemo u Evropu, eto kupio sam jutros dva toalet papira. To zvuči, to je bukvalno na tom nivou. To nema veze sa mozgom, i sada kada je situacija takva, društvene mreže ljudima izgledaju kao neka vrsta izlaza. Kao evo, tu smo, ljudi počinju da veruju da se tu vodi neki razgovor i da je tu moguć neki razgovor. Ja čak mislim da ovi iz vlasti onda kažu: "jeste jeste samo vidite tamo i tamo razgovarajte" pa onda pusti one trolove svoje da truju, onda nastane potpuni haos, onda se napravi zbrka u glavama tih ljudi koji ne razumeju društvene mreže.

[0:26:40-0:27:56]

Većina ljudi recimo iz te akademske zajednice ili umetničke zajednice, kako da Vam kažem, čak I novinari, oni ne razumeju kako funkcionišu društvene mreže. I ljudi na primer ponekad stvarno misle da tamo postoji debata, a debata je kako da kažem ako postoji neka interaktivna debata, neka onlajn debata, to je maksimum ovo što recimo vi ja sad radimo. Ili ja recimo ja Vas mogu da vidim, mogu da procenim neku vašu reakciju, kako se ponašate. Vi možete mene da procenite, možete da zaključite da li ja nešto izmišljam da li ne izmišljam, da li sam uverljiv, nisam uverljiv I tako dalje. Kad sedim i pišem ko zna ko sam. Znači na nivou opet onog magarca, kao što I ovi trolovi radi. Znači imaju po 5.000 naloga i po ceo dan samo troluju.

[0:27:57-0:29:30]

S: Pa, znate šta, ima nekoliko tu nivoa. Prvi nivo je taj institucionalni. Ponekad te institucije vam kažu: "pa znaš šta, radio bih ja ali ne smem". To isto argument. Znači, ako ako ste vi zabrinuti, ako vi pomislite da ako uradite nešto što odstupa od ovog mainstreama vlasti i da ćete zbog toga sutra biti predmet rasprava na Pinku u jutarnjem programu. Da ćete se pojaviti u 2,3 tabloida, kako da Vam kažem, Vi kažete "možda ja ne moram to sada radim" Znači, i onda pokušate nekako da pereš sebi obraz. Evo sad na primer REM, institucija koje bi trebalo da se stara o elektronskim medijima. Vi kad pogledate njihov izveštaj koji su sad uradili koji je na 300 strana. Oni će sutra reći: "pa mi smo radili naš posao" i oni su stvarno radili, stvarno su napisali da to nema veze s mozgom.

A: Ali ne postoji reakcija?

S: Na šta znaš šta je ličila medijska scena. To svi znaju. Ali je ta vrsta... znate šta, ja strah taj ne osećam. Vi ste meni malopre pitali, ja ne razumem, ja kažem ljudi: „radite svoj posao! Zašto ne radite svoj posao?“

[0:29:31-0:30:41]

S: Ja nisam video da su oni, recimo se RTS-a otpustili nekog zato što je ovaj.. Oni su pomerili ljude. Evo sada recimo kao što je Jelena Obućina, koja radi kod nas sada na News Maks-u, ona je sklonjena bila.

A: I Olivera Kovačević je prešla na zabavni program.

S: Ona je uvek bila zabavni, ne mislim ja da je to neka velika stvar. Hoću da Vam kažem: “radite svoj posao” informativni deo javnog servisa je ključni, a oni dođu i kažu: “ne, evo mi imamo 19 funkcija. 18 ispunjavamo.” Pa da, ali ovu glavnu ne ispunjavate. To je kao da kažete: “moj organizam je u redu, srce mi ne radi ali ovo drugo sve, to je sve super.” Da, ali ako srce ne radi, ti ne postojiš. Super ti je jetra, krvni sudovi su ti dobro, mozak ti je OK, oči rade mišići su tu, super si, nemaš sala, odlično, ali srce stalo. Gotovo je. Tako i oni. Šta je garancija da to tako ne bude?

[00:30:42-0:33:05]

Prva stvar, kada se vi oslobodite ove vrste pritiska koji pravi ova vlast svakog dana. Tim svojim nenormalnim ponašanjem, tom svojom netransparentnom vlašću. Jer, znate šta oni misle, recimo oni bi sad rekli: “kako nismo transparentni, se pa mi sve govorimo ljudima.” Da, oni dođu u jutarnji program I onda im ovi daju slot od pola sata. Juče je bio minister Mali na Happy-ju. Jutros je bila ministarka Mihajlović na Pinku. I ti dobiješ slot od pola sata da ispričaš šta god hoćeš. I onda oni kažu: ”pa ljudi, ne znam koliko da budem otvoren, ovo je najotvorenije.” Ali to nema veze s mozgom, jer šta god ti njih da pitaš, što odstupa od njihovog teksta koji su spremili, ne postoji odgovor.

A: Ali isto tako na tim televizijama koje ste sada naveli, ne postoje ni pitanja.

S: Ne postoje. Pitanja koje im tamo postavljaju novinari su sledeća: “Ministre Mali, kako komentarišete ovo što Georgiev kaže da vi ne radite u interesu javnosti?” Eto, to su Vam pitanja.

A: To je neka vrsta samo-cenzure?

S: „Videli smo na tviteru jutros, kažu da vi nemate pojma. Pa kako vi to komentarišete?” Evo, to su recimo pitanja. Tako se vodi recimo razgovor. Niko ne pita njega da kaže: “ok, vi ste rekli, u trećem kvartalu smo sjajni, ali ako pogledamo period od 7 ili 8 godina koliko ste vi na vlasti, mi vidimo da je zapravo Srbija, I to stručnjaci govore, imate nalaze, mi vidimo da Srbija u odnosu na Hrvatsku, Crnu Goru, Rumuniju I Bugarsku itd je najmanje napredovala. Šta nama garantuje da ćete u narednih 7 godina, baš ovo što govorite, to da poljšate?” To pitanje ne postoji. Postoji samo priča, ona koja je spremna, dakle PR priča. Bukvalno je tako. Pogledajte svuda po Evropi, ja mislim da su ovo nezabeleženi slučajevi.

[00:33:06-00:38:33]

A: To sam htela da Vas pitam, u vezi situacije u Srbiji I situacije u medijima generalno u Evropi, možda I u svetu. Dosta smo pali na tim rejtingima raznih indexa, Freedom House itd. Evropska Unija takodje svake godine u svom izveštaju spominje pluralizam I generalno slobodu medija kao nešto sto je ugroženo u Srbiji. Kako vi to komentarišete, u smislu da, mi smo zemlja kandidat I naše evropske integracije napreduju nekim tokom ali te slobode nazaduju.

S: Prvo, integracije ne napreduju. Srbija će sad kad istekne ova godina, za dve godine biti da su otovrili dva poglavlja. Integracije su stopirane. Za te integracije postoje dva razloga zasto su stopirane. Jedan je razlog koji se tiče ovoga o čemu mi pričamo plus vladavina prava, poglavlje 23. Na tome nemci insistiraju. Generalno nema nikakvih pomeranja, nikakvih promena. Tako da nema evropskih integracija. Evropske integracije ne postoje. Nekako se to poklopilo sa zastojem u dijalogu sa Kosovom, što je logično zato sto Srbija za razliku od svih drugih zemalja koje su ušle u EU, ima jedno posebno poglavlje, a to je poglavlje 35. Mislim da je ovde red i vreme da neko kaže ljudima isto to, da ako ne priznamo Kosovo, necemo ući u Evropsku Uniju, ali nigde u javnosti nije tako eksplicitno. Osim kada

se pojavi negde nemački ambasador koji to kaže na jedan diplomatski način. Dakle neće biti te integracije bez priznanja Kosova.

A: Da, ali ovde je druga tema. Hajde da zamislimo situaciju: Srbija je priznala Kosovo. Šta Vi mislite, da li bi se te evropske integracije ubrzale iako bi medijske slobode i vladavina prava ostale na istom nivou?

S: Da, ubrzale bi se sigurno. Mi vidimo da i Evropa sama ima puno problema. Evo sada ovih dana je velika rasprava oko Poljske i Mađarske. Dakle ne vidim uopšte..

A: Dakle, Vi mislite da Evropskoj Uniji „nije toliko stalo?“

S: Ne, to je naš najveći problem. Vi imate ljude koji su verovali u nešto i koji su pričali drugim ljudima da treba da veruju u to. A to je taj dobri svet, uređeni svet, čiji deo treba da budemo a mi sada vidimo da tog sveta nema. I to je to. I Vi nemate, kako da kažem, nikakvu suštinsku podršku. Jer da tog sveta ima, ovo u Srbiji bi se završilo za 15 dana i Vi i ja o ovome uopšte ne bismo razgovarali.

A: Ako sam dobro shvatila, Vi govorite da je Evropska Unija odustala na neki način od vrednosti na kojima počiva?

S: Ona na njima ne insistira. Jer da insistira, ona bi valjda pravila saveze sa onima koji veruju u te vrednosti. A ne sa onima koji ne veruju u te vrednosti. Ja razumem sad, neko hoće to preneti na neku simboličku ravan ono, biblijska priča o bludnom sinu pa sad hoće neko bludnog sina da dovede da se preobrazi. Sad ćete vi od Vučića radikala da napravite evropejca. Pa to se nikad neće desiti. Niti će on preobratiti svoje biračko telo. Jer on jednu priču priča nemcima, uslovno nemcima, a drugu priču pričal svojim biračima. A sve vreme priča o tome kako on svima uvek iste stvari priča. To je laž 1/1, što smo videli toliko i to se tolerize. Znači, to se potpuno toleriše, to je sve OK zarad ne znam čega. Ja nisam razumeo. Kada pitate te ljude ovde koji se pojavljuju u Beogradu, predsednike zapadnih zemalja, oni kažu: „pa možda on ode uz Kinu, možda ode uz Rusiju“. Stvarno? Srbija, pogledate mapu Evrope Balkan je središte Evrope. Nismo središte Sibira ili tamo pored pustinje Gobi, nego smo središte Evrope. I da su ti ljudi koji tamo koji tamo rade to, vode, građani Evropske unije, oni to ne kapiraju. Mislim, šta ja mogu tu da uradim. Mi ne možemo ništa. Bićemo tu da vidimo šta možemo i kako možemo se izborimo a sve se svodi sad na preživljavanje, ove ljude koji bi najradije voleli da mi ili da predemo na njihovu stranu- to bi bilo idealno. Ali ako baš ne možemo da predemo na njihovu stranu i radimo to što i svi drugi, onda da nas nema, da se ne bavimo time. Ima drugih poslova, nešto naći, radi.

[00:38:33-00:40:43]

A: Možda se sećate, to je bilo 2015, Han je izjavio na konferenciji da stalno čita o toj medijskog cenzuri u Srbiji i u manjku sloboda, pa je rekao i da stalno čita ali da ne vidi dokaze. BIRN je tada izdao saopštenje i tu se spominje stabilnost, stabilitocracy. Da li Vi podržavate tu tezu još uvek, i sa današnjeg aspekta, prošlo je 5 godina da li mislite zbog stabilnosti u regionu je EU spremna da zažmuri na medijske slobode?

S: Ja mislim da su oni negde, Han je imao dok je bio tu razne zanimljive izjave. Meni je recimo zanimljiva jedna njegova prezentacija koju je on imao u Prinstonu isto negde tu, da li 2015-2016. Gde je on zapravo uzeo ovaj naš region i predstavio kao ga kao jednu veliku pobedu Evrope. Za razliku od Bliskog Istoka gde je stalno neka tenzija, imamo dole Severnu Afriku gde postoje ogromni problemi, da je Balkan bomba. To je to, to je rešeno. Nije idealno ali evo, niko nikog ne ubija. Zive oni kao zajedno pa nešto valja, nešto ne valja ali kao to je to. I ja mislim da je to to.

A: Da je to kako vidi..

S: Da, da je to max (maksimalno) mi je krivo mi je zbog toga. Zato što vi kad pogledate suštinski, mi govorimo o šest nekih zemalja, teritorija, zovi kako god hoćeš. Znači tu živi ja mislim 20tak miliona ljudi. Znači to je kao Paris sa okolinom i vi govorite da vi to ne možete da integrišete? Pa kakva ste vi onda organizacija? To je pod jedan.

[0:40:44-0:42:10]

S: Pod dva, pa ni u Americi nisu sve države bogate. U Luizijani ne žive oni ljudi koji žive na Menhetnu ili u Bostonu ili na Beverli Hills-u ili u Missuriju. Znači, nije takva stvar. Nego se dođe i uvedu se pravila. Moraju da postoje neka osnovna pravila, osnovni zakoni.

A: *Da, bas to..*

S: Samo momenat. Integracija se pretvorila u mnoštvo nekih administriranja onoga key-a evropskog koji je obiman, koji je bezobalan i gde se više ne zna šta je važno što nije. Jer kažu: "sve je važno". I onda ljudi sprdaju kao, aha jednako je važno tvoje medijske slobode i da li ja treba da pravim krastavac dužine 15 ili 20 cm. Razumete, na to se svodi. To je besmislica, ta birokratska koja dolazi iz Evropske Unije. I to ljudi vide, vide da je to besmislica I ne moraju ljudi ništa kažu. Oni se okrenuu i gledaju svoja posla, I ne bave se time, ne zanima ih to uopšte. I izato Vi kad pogledate sad isto istraživanja, ona pitanja "da li ste za EU"? Tu je sve manje I manje ljudi, jer oni vide da je to neozbiljno. Koliko god se Evropa kao trudila, evo sad su izlepili tu po Srbiji bilborde kao evo, mi smo platili puteve, platili smo..Koga briga?

[0:42:11-0:45:00]

S: Zajednice se ne prave tako što ti napraviš puteve. Nego tako što kažeš, ljudi se okupe oko nekih vrednosti treba nam vatra, ljudi se skupe, kažu: "treba meni, treba tebi, kad smo zajedno, medved ne može da nas pojede. Znači, to je to. Nije ono, ajde da napravimo ulicu. Ne, nije to. Mi delimo neke vrednosti ili ne delimo. Mi ako ne delimo vrednosti, šta ćete, koga briga?

A: *Dobro, s druge strane, Evropska Unija je pokušala na neki način pred izbore da vodi neki dijalog tj. da opozicija i vlast vode dijalog. To se nije pokazalo previše uspešnim.*

S: To je pokazatelj koliko je EU neuspešna. To nije pokazatelj koliko je Srbija neuspešna, nego koliko je EU neuspešna. Kao što je i sa Kosovom. To nije srpski problem, to je evropski problem. A nama stalno stalno govore: "to je vaš problem ali ako mi možemo da vam pomognemo". Ne drugari, to je vaš problem. To je isto vaš problem. I vi nam kažete, oni Albanci su mafijaši tamo, hoće da prebegnu svi, hoće da se odsele. Ovi su ovakvi, Bugari su ovakvi. To je vaš problem, ne možete da ga ignorirate. Jeste vi ozbiljna neka organizacija ili ste šarlatani. To je isto izazov za njih. Ja ne vidim da tu ima sposobnih nekih ljudi i vrednih i tako dalje koji to hoće da reše. Ovo što je radio Tramp sa Grenelom, pa to je 5 milja ispred svega sto radila Evropska Uunija I to za ne znam, dva meseca. Zašto? Zato što su ljudi, ono što se kaže: goal oriented. Ti postaviš cilj, postaviš rok, I ideš da ga rešiš. Ti kad pitaš Evropljane, niti znaju šta je cilj, ili neće da nam kažu niti znaju kad će da ga reše. Kao I ovaj naš razgovor. Vi ste mogli da mi se javite i da kažete: „eto, ja bih volela da se mi vidimo nekad“, ja kažem: „dobro, važi. Kad ćemo?“ „Pa dobro, nekad.“ „Pa dobro nekad“ Moglo je da bude danas, moglo je da bude za 15 dana, moglo je da bude za 15 godina, jel tako? Imamo cilj, imamo za šta nam to treba i to radimo. Oni ljudi to nemaju.

[0:45:01-0:50:32]

A: *Prvi tabloidi u tom obliku su se pojavili posle demokratskih promena. I pre ubistva Đinđića. Postojala je neka organizovana medijska tj tabloidna hajka protiv njega. A slično nešto se dogodilo I sa Oliverom Ivanovićem, tj pre njegovog ubistva. Da li postoje neke razlike između ta dva slučaja sa aspekta tabloida.*

S: Velike su razlike. U Đinđićevo doba, kada su se pojavili prvi tabloidi, Nacional, Identitet, sad smo već zaboravili kako se šta zvalo. To jesu bili instrument. Tabloide su pravili..imate onu knjigu Umberta Eka upravo o tome. Kako se pravi tabloid da bi se upotrebio u nekoj političkoj opciji.

A: *Koja politička opcija je bila u tom slučaju iza tih tabloida?*

S: Na koji slučaj sada mislite? Na Đinđićev ili?

A: *Da, na Đinđićev.*

S: To je ovo što se zove anti-haški lobi. To Vam je to, Velika Srbija fazon. To su radikali, to je Šešelj, to je Vučić, to je ta ekipa. Oni su zagovarali tu politiku. Ti tabloidi koji su napadali Đinđića na taj način praveći od njega kriminalca Oni su (...) radikala. Koji su u to vreme jedini zastupali ideologiju Velike

Srbije kao što I danas zastupaju. To je to. A Oliver je mnogo manji igrač bio u tom smislu I u vreme kada je on..znate I kada je emitovan onaj film.

A: Na Pinku?

S: Da, na Pinku. To ovde nikakv efekat nije imalo specijalan, niko nije obratio pažnju na to. Mi smo imali u BIRN-u intervju sa njim. Jedini. Nikoga nije zanimalo. Ljude ovde nije zanimalo šta se dešava dole na Kosovu. Kao što ih I danas ne zanima, uopšte. A znači u to vreme, to je znači pre 2 I po godine, I pre toga, tamo 2013-2014 ljudi koji su živeli na severu Mitrovice su govorili: “ovo što se dešava kod nas sada, to će se preseliti na celu Srbiju”. Šta se to dešavalo na severu Mitrovice? Na severu Mitrovice se dešavala integracija kriminala I države. Tako je uspostavljena kontrola nad svim biračima I onda je taj mehanizam preseljen u ostatak Srbije. I to mi danas imamo. To je ta integracija. I Vi taj jedan model koji su oni uspostavili tamo...i znate šta, Oliver je bio čovek koji nije hteo da bude na Srpskoj listi I on je ubijen. Ljudi koji ovde ne žele da budu na Vučićevoj listi, na sreću još nije počeo da ih ubija. Ali oni su odstranjeni, uništeni, tim non-stop kampanjama, izmišljotinama, pričama, 700 miliona, 900 miliona. 700 miliona, 900 miliona. Pre neko veče je Vučić rekao, pitao ga je Marić: „eto, kažu, tvoj sin sedi s kriminalcima, to su neki navijači, ko zna ko su“. „Ali evo ja“, kaže Vučić, „ja sam sedeo s Đilasom, znate li vi koliki je on kriminalac.“ Razumete? To je, to je zaista fenomen. I ovde sad čak mislim za istaživače je mnogo zanimljivije, sa strane. Mi ovde smo unutra pa nije to. A li sa strane, ne znam kako niko nije uzeo da se bavi tim mehanizmima koji su ovi radikali prmenili ovde u tom svom upravljanju. Jedan dzojstik je medijski a drugi je bezbednosni. Vi imate UDB-u koja služi, ne da štiti zemlju od terorizma, foreign influence. UDB-a treba da prati političke neprijatelje, protivnike da dostavljaju informacije o tome, šta oni rade, gde se kreću, čime se bave. Šta pišu, šta govore po kafanama, ovamo, onamo. I onda da time punimo tabloide I da od tih ljudi pravimo ništarije da vidi narod kakvi su oni ustvari.

[0:50:33-0:56:27]

A: Sada kad ste već spomenuli to, moj master rad se baš fokusira na te konkretne mehanizme, i na institucije I zakone ali I na mehanizme kroz koje vlast utiče I na finansijsku, I kroz tabloide I tako dalje. Koje biste Vi izdvojili kao neke, recimo top tri koji imaju najviše uticaja?

S: Evo, ja sam Vam sada rekao, to možete da pogledate kroz način na koji su oni uspostavljali vlast od 2012 godine.

A: Znači, ta jedna je finansijska?

S: Znači, prva stvar koju su uradili je da preuzmu kontrolu nad tim bezbednosnim sektorom. I to su uradili formalno, znači institucionalno tako što su promenili zakon o Nacionalnom Savetu za Bezbednost. To je jedna institucija koja je formirana 2008 godine u cilju borbe protiv terorizma, organizovanog kriminala i ratnih zločinaca. Ta struktura koja je tada napravljena, je dovela do toga da budu uhapšeni Ratko Mladić i Karadžić. Prvo Karadžić 2008, pa i Mladić 2011. Da bude razbucan klan Darka Šarića i tako dalje. E sad, oni su prvo tu izmenili zakon da bi Vučić mogao da nude broj jedan u tom Savetu za Nacionalnu Bezbednost. To su uradili odmah 2012 godine. To je ono, što se kaže, kako smo preuzeli “duboku državu”. Šta je taj savet za Savetu za Nacionalnu Bezbednost? Znači, Savet za Nacionalnu Bezbednost je jedno telo gde se slivaju sve informacije, znači organizovano.

A: Kakve to veze sad konkretno ima sa medijima?

S: Sada ću Vam reći. Kada se desi nešto, recimo, kada se desi neko ubistvo, ne idu prvo informacije Tužiocu nego su svi oni dužni da prikupe sve informacije I odnesu ovom čoveku koji vodi Savetu za Nacionalnu Bezbednost. Razumete? I onda on upravlja tim informacijama I tim stvarima, što je po meni skandalozno. Vi imate ovde situaciju da čovek izlazi, njemu to nije mandat, pogotov sada kad je predsednik, da govori stalno o nekim krivičnim delima, o izvršenju: „mi smo na tragu“, „mi ćemo ovog uhapsiti“, „tu smo već ovog locirali, znamo ko je ovaj – onaj“ i tako dalje. Razumete? To je prosto, po meni..kada se to desi, na najvećem mogućem nivou, urušavanje institucija. Jer ako to radi predsednik, sa tog mesta, kakva je poruka za sve ostale? To je prvi nivo, institucionalni nivo – urušavanje svih institucija. To je jedan mehanizam: uništi institucije. Ne može to, a pogotovo to kao nezavisne institucije, on zna kakve je probleme imao sa Sašom Jankovićem. To je jedna stvar: uništava institucije. Ok. Druga stvar: uništavaj ove koji bi rekli da ti uništavaš institucije. Dakle, bilo da su iz akademske zajednice, bilo da su iz javnog života, bilo da su iz umetničkog, bilo da su iz medijskog, odakle god hoćete. Dakle, ko god se pojavi, kao na onoj igrici: udari ga čeićem po glavi, zakucaj ga. Kako ćemo to da uradimo? Uz pomoć medija. Prvo ćemo da ih izolujemo. Znači sklonićemo ih, oni više neće moći da govore javno o tome, ovde gde su se nekad pojavljivali, nestaće iz te sfere. Izvućićemo ih iz te sfere a onda ćemo da ih dotučemo u ovoj našoj novoj sferi. Gde ćemo pokazati da nije delikvent Siniša Mali, koji je dokazano ukrao doktorat, ili Nebojša Stefanović, ili Jorgovanka Tabaković, nego je delikvent Dana Popović. Koja je predavala na američkim univerzitetima. I onda vi pravite potpuni kurčlus u javnom prostoru, u životu ljudi i tako dalje. Jer se ispostavlja da vi kažete: “pa čekajte, pa ona je meni pedavala”, evo ja gledam biografiju, to je sve u redu. Oni kažu: “ne,ne, oni su te lagali, ona je lažov, ona je lopov I to radi 30 godina I to ćemo mi da promenimo”. “A ko je ustvari pravi? Pravi je Siniša Mali.” Nadam se da me razumeš.

A: *Sve razumem.*

S Objašnjavam taj mehanizam. I to se sad dešava I sa lekarima isto. Vi možete da budete najbolji lekar na svetu, da ste uradili ne znam šta, ako se ne slažete sa njima [naprednjacima] napraviće od vas majmuna. Prićaće da si korumpiran, da si uzimao drogu, da si krao, da si nameštao, i tako dalje. A ministar je čovek koga zovu „Doktor Smrt“ koji je isto lažirao svoj doktorat. Nego niko ne sme da govori o tome. Znaju se ljudi, mi smo našli ljude koji su mu pisali doktorat. Recimo, njemu uopšte ta titula nije bila potrebna, jer on je čovek hirurg i nije bezvezni hirurg. Ok je hirurg, zna to da radi ali je hteo da ima, hteo je da bude profesor na univerzitetu. I morao je da ima doktorat, morao je da ima akademsku titulu. Angažovao je ljude, skupio ljude i oni su mu napisali doktorat.

[0:56:28-1:00:34]

A: *Jasno. Htela sam samo, pošto ste spomenuli urušavanje institucija, još samo kratko. Jedna institucija za koju ja verujem da još uvek nije uništena je Savet za borbu protiv korupcije. Da li postoji još neka institucija ili kakvo mišljenje uopšte imate o Savetu?*

S: Savet je, kao što mu i ime kaže, on je bukvalno savetodavno telo, savetodavni organ. I oni su uradili puno dobrih izveštaja I radili su neke koji nisu bili dovoljno potkrepljeni.

A: *Koji na primer?*

S: Recimo prvi izveštaj Verice Barać koji ste verovatno čitali o medijima. Taj izveštaj koji je u osnovi tačan, način na koji on napravljen i prezentovan nije bio dobar. I onda je na tom mestu, na neki način bio delegitimisan rad. Da li me čujete?

A: *Da, da, na kratko se bilo samo prekinulo.*

S: E, bio je delegitimisan rad u javnosti saveta zato što je ona..Tada je ona htela da kaže da su svi mediji pod kontrolom vlasti i objašnjavala je to delimično kroz ovaj mehanizam o kome smo pričali na početku: Đilas, Šaper media buying agencija i tako dalje. Zašto kažem da je to tad bilo opasno? Zato što je to naravno, tadašnja pozicija, ovi što sada na vlasti, oni su to iskoristili kao ono što se kaže: ‚fuel‘ i mahali su time, kao što su mahali onim njihovim izveštajima 24 privatizacije. Koji su bili prepoznati kao dobar materijal za rad tužilaštva. I to je Evropska Unija insistirala na tome to na kraj se ništa od toga nije desilo. Razumete? Tako da, ne znam šta bi Vam rekao. Oni sada rade u nekom okrnjenom njenom sastavu. Ne izjašnjavaju se o najvećim stvarima i problemima koje se ovde dešavaju. Ko još radi? Ja mislim da je veliku ulogu poslednjih godina imala ova institucija Poverenika za informacije od javnog značaja. Da je ona i dan danas dobro oružje za mnoge, i novinare i istraživače. Pa čak i za institucije, jer mnoge institucije saznaju o tome šta se dešava tako što traže preko poverenika da im neka druga institucija dostavi podatke ili informacije. Tako da to postoji ali suštinski, ljudi su važni. Znači, neki važni ljudi koji su vodili neke institucije ili radili u njima kao što su recimo neki ljudi iz agencije za borbu protiv korupcije, oni su oterani, nema više tamo nikog. Znate, kao došli su neki novi ali oni ne rade ništa. Oni bukvalno samo fajliraju one Excel sheet-ove koje im političari dostavljaju o svojoj imovini. To je sve. Oni ništa ne proveravaju, ništa ne rade i tako dalje. Tako da, to je to. Nije ni lako napraviti institucije, a posebno ih nije lako napraviti u režimu u kome je jedna od paradigmi: uništimo institucije, jer nam one zapravo ničemu i ne služe. Kako je jednom rekao ovaj čovek, kaže što bi zato on je recimo rekao svojevremeno evropljanima: „Zašto vi dajte 2 miliona evra u 2 godine za medije u Srbiji, kad ste mogli te pare date meni, ja bih u nekom selu napravio mostić.“

[1:00:35-1:01:16]

S: To je to razumevanje, tako da i ti ljudi i sve te institucije, to realno treba pogasiti, šta će nam to. Samo trošimo pare i ničemu ne služe.

A: *Jasno. Hvala vam puno.*

End

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