

MEDIA DIVERSITY ACTIVISM IN SERBIA: MAPPING ACTORS AND ACTIVITIES

Executive Summary and
Recommendations

—
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The report “Media Diversity Activism in Serbia”, authored by Jovanka Matić, presents the model and results of mapping actors and activities in the media diversity field over the last two years (2023 - 2024).

It identifies the type of diversity actors, their main work domain, origin, geographical location and the degree of engagement. Additionally, it examines the forms and types of activities, their dominant thematic areas and guiding ideas, diversity issues they tackle, target groups and sources of finances.

The mapping was based on the content analysis of publicly available online sources, following the codebook specifically designed for finding and classifying information about relevant activities and engaged actors.

MEDIA CONTEXT

According to Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" reports, Serbia has been partly free since 2018. It suffers from both state and media capture. Media freedoms are the greatest victim of the growing authoritarianism of the political system. The media environment has become a highly divided field between the mainstream media acting as the propaganda backbone of the regime and a small group of media critical of the government. Media narratives are polarized, leaving little room for diverse representation in public discourse.

Despite these obstacles, the pro-diversity field is active and vibrant, involving 25 actors and 44 recorded activities over the last two years. These efforts aim to enhance the possibilities for marginalized groups to voice their concerns.

KEY FINDINGS

ACTORS

- A typical actor is a civil society organisation (56%), Serbian by origin (84%), situated in Belgrade (52%), dealing either with media development or with the rights of marginalised groups (40%), performing one activity a year, usually focused on one particular marginalised group or all of them taken together.
- Other types of pro-diversity actors included state bodies (20%), media outlets or publishers (16%) and professional associations (8%).
- Among 25 actors, two are of European origin (European Union, Council of Europe) and two of regional origin (South East Europe, Western Balkans).
- A majority of Serbian actors (68%) are located in the country's three largest cities, Belgrade (12 actors), Novi Sad (three) and Nis (two).
- Most active were the Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans and Novi Sad Journalism School, initiators of seven and six activities respectively, during 22 months.

ACTIVITIES

The 44 recorded activities were organized around a considerable variety of thematic areas, including the following:

- training and education for media professionals (34%) - based on workshops, handbooks and manuals aiming to raise professional awareness of diversity issues and often including the results of media monitoring and research (9%);
- media literacy and public awareness (16%) - striving to empower target groups in a variety of ways for critical engagement with biased and unethical media narratives;

- inclusive content creation (13%) - focusing on depicting marginalised groups in a variety of roles and identities, using mentorship assistance, multimedia formats and CSOs-media partnerships;
- legislation and regulation (9%) - involving amendments to the Law on Electronic Media and self-regulation norms and practices;
- support to new project initiatives (9%);
- countering hate speech (5%);
- innovative approaches (5%) - comprising only two activities, both of a regional nature: the SEENPM's initiative for civil society movement for media activism and the cooperation of the Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans with citizens in spotting hate speech and producing alternative narratives.

MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES AND TARGET GROUPS

- The activities focused on four marginalised communities:
 - women and gender identity groups (with a focus on gender equality and LGBTQ+ issues)
 - people with disabilities (centered on training, content production, and advocacy)
 - youth (focusing on mental health issues and media literacy)
 - ethnic minorities (limited to Roma communities).
- Most activities (56%) addressed diversity issues related to a single marginalised group.
- One-third (32%) dealt with all underrepresented groups, or with many, without identifying them.
- The only kind of multiply disadvantaged social group addressed was youth with mental health issues.
- The primary targets of activities were journalists and media organisations. Each of them were mentioned separately in 55% of activities. In 28% of the cases they were mentioned together.
- Both "journalists" and "media", as the main target groups, were rarely specified.
- The next most frequent target audiences were marginalised groups (41% of activities) and civil society organisations (25%).
- State institutions, i.e. policymakers, were rarely tackled (14%), even less often specifically identified as expected change-makers.

FUNDING

- Foreign funders supported the overwhelming majority of activities (38, i.e. 86%), while domestic funding accounted for 9%.
- External funding came from 11 donors, with the European Union being the largest contributor (36% of activities). The EU either acted as a sole donor, or in collaboration with other European organisations (Council of Europe, entities in Sweden, Norway and Germany).
- Other international donors included the US Embassy in Serbia, Balkan Trust for Democracy, OSCE Mission to Serbia and UN Secretary General's Peace Building Fund.
- Out of 44 activities, nine were financially supported for a period longer than 10 months.

CONCLUSIONS

Media diversity activism in Serbia demonstrates high resilience in an unfavourable social and media environment. Despite its vibrancy, the field faces several challenges, such as a limited range in the types of pro-diversity actors, low involvement of international actors and local organizations outside urban centres, a narrow focus on select marginalised groups and target audiences, over-reliance on short-term initiatives driven by international funding, a lack of innovative approaches and insufficient engagement with policymakers and decision-makers in the media.

The mapping indicates a need for interested actors and financial donors to launch a new wave of innovative, long-term, pro-diversity actions tackling other elements of media structures apart from journalists as content producers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Pro-diversity activism should launch a new wave of initiatives that would involve a broader range of both activities and actors (regarding the type of actors, their geographical location, selection of marginalised communities and target groups, sources of funding).
- A new wave of activism should centre on systemic, innovative and multi-stakeholder approaches as well as on a long-term commitment by funders.
- Innovative approaches should be aimed at policymakers, public broadcasters, media owners and managers in national and local media, media educators and should advocate for inclusive media as an integrative factor in the highly polarised society.
- Media diversity activism should reduce its heavy reliance on international donors and turn more towards domestic humanitarian foundations, the private business sector and funders in government sectors dealing with minority rights.

INDIVIDUAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTORS

National and local state institutions

- The Serbian Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue should include social inclusion goals in its work domain and establish working relations with media diversity actors.
- Local governments should treat inclusive media content production as a recommendable criterion in their annual programmes for co-funding media projects serving the public interest.

International and domestic donors

- In order to sustain media diversity initiatives, donors should assist mid-term (24-36 months) and long-term programmes or projects, rather than short-term ones.
- Donors should encourage systemic and innovative activities dealing with media policy elaboration, legislation implementation, public service broadcasting, spending of public funds for vulnerable communities, etc.
- Donors could help broaden the geographic reach of media diversity activism by stimulating actors outside major urban centres, especially in less developed regions, and by fostering the engagement of local media outlets.
- When donor support involves media production, it should include financial means for the development of relationships between media and local marginalised social groups and for the promotion of the newly produced content.

Media diversity actors

- Actors should initiate new areas of activity, tackling all important elements of media structures, such as legislation, national media policy, media ownership, media funding, the position of and opportunities for community media, diversity policies and employment policy within media organisations, etc.
- Actors should direct their activities to public service broadcasters who are obliged to take special care of marginalised groups, monitor their role in voicing marginalised groups and advocate for increased accountability and transparency in public service media practices.
- Actors should engage in innovative activities, such as building the capacities of alternative media, development of digital campaigns, participation of citizens in countering discriminatory media content, participation of youth in inclusive content creation, development of journalist networks interested in diversity issues, networks of experts for the problems of underrepresented groups who can help exclude stereotypes and biases in media content.
- Actors should strengthen their policy engagement by establishing working relationships with relevant state institutions (Ministry for Human and Minority Rights, Commissioner for the Protection of Equality), advocate for the stronger involvement of these institutions in media diversity and offer cooperation and common activities.
- Actors should expand the geographical reach of their activities to local areas across Serbia and encourage the participation of local media in their initiatives.
- Actors should establish stronger relations with media owners and media managers and advocate the benefits of inclusive media. They should encourage media owners and managers to adopt inclusive hiring practices and increase workforce diversity and advocate for internships aimed at underrepresented groups in journalism.
- Actors should broaden the scope of their activities to address the needs of neglected marginalised groups such as rural communities, older adults, socioeconomically disadvantaged households, ethnic and religious minorities.
- Special attention should be paid to multiple disadvantaged groups, such as women and children in rural areas, youth of Roma origin, elderly people living in poverty, etc.
- Short-term and local initiatives should be tailored in such a way as to promote the specific rights and needs of particular marginalised groups instead of discriminated groups taken together.
- Actors should encourage participatory journalism initiatives to empower marginalised communities.
- Actors should engage with private sector partners and foundations to support their long-term projects.

- Actors should strengthen their partnerships with other CSOs and with alternative or local media.
- Media outlets as pro-diversity actors should elaborate annual plans for making connections with marginalised social groups and foster their credibility through meetings with citizens, debates on media content, project implementation, etc.
- Professional associations (of media, journalists, media employees, networks), should be more engaged in the media diversity field, either by running pro-diversity projects themselves or by assisting inclusive media, promoting and rewarding their practices.

