SUSPENSION OF DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC

 BIRODI CASE

MEDIA CONTEXT

The observation mission of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), in its report on the parliamentary elections held on December 17, 2023, stated recommendation number 22 (related to election day), which reads:

"The authorities should guarantee adequate conditions for both citizens and international observers to carry out their activities with unhindered access to all information related to the elections, in a timely manner and in a manner and environment free from pressure and intimidation, in accordance with the international obligations undertaken by Serbia."

The status of observer organizations has not changed following this ODIHR recommendation. On the contrary, it is obvious that civil society organizations, which are intensively and dedicatedly involved in the integrity of the electoral process, have been subject to false media coverage and labeling campaigns.

The fact that ODIHR, through its recommendation, identified the need to open up the issue of the position of domestic and international observers, as well as the fact that the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) delayed the publication of its findings on the coverage of commercial broadcasters with national reach, which BIRODI and ODIHR found to be clearly biased towards the government, prompted BIRODI researchers to monitor the interview with the President of Serbia on TV Prva, conducted by journalist Marija Savić Stamenić on 18 February 2024, as part of the morning program.

After an initial review of the content of the interview, BIRODI, through a press release, approached REM with a request for this supreme regulatory body in the field of electronic media to determine whether there had been a breach of Articles 4 (full, accurate and timely information), 8 (right of reply) and 27 (hate speech) of the Rulebook on the Protection of Human Rights in the Provision of Media Services.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In addition to submitting the request to REM, BIRODI initiated and carried out the monitoring of the President's appearances using the internationally comparable MEMO 98 method, which is in line with the principles of the Venice Commission, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the European Commission's Directorate for Human Rights.

The results of monitoring the interview of the Serbian President on TV Prva showed that out of a total of 2,377 seconds, 82.9% were positive, 17.1% neutral and 0% negative!

Table 1 Time and Tone of Representation of Actors in the President's Interview on TV Prva on February 18, 2024.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | Total time | Extremely negative | Negative | Neutral | Positive | Extremely positive |
| Aleksandar Vučić, President | **2377** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **18,0** | **71,7** | **10,2** |
| EU | **282** | **19,9** | **78,4** | **0,0** | **1,8** | **0,0** |
| Dragan Đilas, Party of Freedom and Justice  | **191** | **67,0** | **23,6** | **9,4** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| Zoran Lutovac, Democratic Party | **30** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **100,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| Serbia (if not categorized as Government) | **171** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **100,0** | **0,0** |
| Pavle Grbović, Movement of Free Citizens  | **22** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **100,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| Nebojša Zelenović, Together | **70** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **100,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| Foreign Politicians | **58** | **100,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| Albin Kurti | **51** | **0,0** | **100,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| France | **15** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **100,0** | **0,0** |
| Zdravko Ponoš, HEART Movement | **53** | **62,3** | **0,0** | **37,7** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| Miroslav Aleksić, People’s Movement of Serbia | **7** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **100,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| Pro-European Opposition (Serbia against Violence, ZLF, DS, SSP, PSG, NPS, Ecological Uprising, Together | **215** | **0,0** | **80,0** | **20,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| Milan Radoičić | **34** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **100,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| Collective West, International Community  | **86** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **100,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| Šolak/tycoon media /N1/Nova S | **78** | **0,0** | **100,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| Serbia against Violence coalition  | **55** | **0,0** | **100,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| They, some of them, others, the yellow ones, traitors... (when it cannot be clearly determined which opposition group is being referred to) | **556** | **62,2** | **10,3** | **27,5** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| ProGlas | **396** | **0,0** | **79,8** | **20,2** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| We – A Voice from the People | **134** | **0,0** | **100,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| Journalist | **401** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **86,5** | **13,5** | **0,0** |
| Željko Obradović | **36** | **0,0** | **38,9** | **61,1** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| Basketball club Partisan | **262** | **0,0** | **100,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** |
| Basketball club Red Star | **240** | **0,0** | **100,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** | **0,0** |

These findings gave us the right to address REM, as they contain indications that Articles 4[[2]](#footnote-2) and 8[[3]](#footnote-3) of the Rulebook on the Protection of Human Rights in the Provision of Media Services were violated. The results of the monitoring of the interview with the President of the Republic on TV Prva were sent to the email addresses of REM, the Presidency of the Republic of Serbia, RTS, and journalist Marija Savić Stamenić. To date, we have not received any confirmation of receipt, or registration numbers. This mainly concerns the Presidency of the Republic of Serbia and REM.

Conduct of Online Media

Following the publication of BIRODI's initial statement calling on REM to act in accordance with Article 35 of the Law on Electronic Media, a reaction appeared in the form of an article on several online media platforms, which was very similar in its content. The publication of the said media content is characterized by an identical headline focusing on the "Operation to ban Vučić" and the "Punishment of TV Prva for the interview with Vučić" This media content designed in this way was published in the online editions of TV Pink[[4]](#footnote-4), TV B92[[5]](#footnote-5), Alo daily[[6]](#footnote-6), Informer[[7]](#footnote-7) and Večerenje novosti[[8]](#footnote-8), as well as in the portals Srbija danas[[9]](#footnote-9), Srpski portal[[10]](#footnote-10), Postinfo[[11]](#footnote-11), NSuživo[[12]](#footnote-12), Republika[[13]](#footnote-13) and, finally, Zapadna Srbija, which later retracted the article.

After analyzing this media content, BIRODI issued a public statement to the competent Ministry of Information and Telecommunications and demanded that, in accordance with Article 55 of the Law on Public Information and Media, it determines whether there has been a collapse of media pluralism at the level of daily newspapers.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The results of our interview monitoring on TV Prva lead us to believe it was appropriate to contact[[15]](#footnote-15) the interviewer at RTS, Zoran Stanojević, and share our media monitoring results and analysis of the integrity of election process. We believed that this information could be helpful in reducing biased and promotional reporting, which violates the REM Rulebook and is not appropriate for democratic societies.

Conduct of Television Stations

Following the report by the Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI), a new reaction occurred, this time on national television channels (Pink, Happy and B92) and cable television Informer. During these broadcasts, nearly 70 falsehoods and labels were uttered by more than ten speakers, without once revealing BIRODI's exact findings or the actual content of its press releases to the public.

The Coalition for Integrity (of which BIRODI is a founder), issued a statement[[16]](#footnote-16) without BIRODI's direct involvement, calling on "the relevant institutions to respond and take action within their jurisdictions regarding the relentless campaign against the Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI)".

The response to this statement came from the Prime Minister in a technical mandate and president of the Serbian Progressive Party Belgrade City Board, Ana Brnabić, at a press conference of the Serbian Progressive Party. The Coalition for Integrity reacted[[17]](#footnote-17) to the falsehoods and insults she made on that occasion.

Following the press conference at which data from BIRODI's monitoring for the period from December 18, 2023 to February 17, 2024 was published, almost the same article was reprinted on March 5th, by the online portals of the daily newspapers Alo[[18]](#footnote-18), Informer[[19]](#footnote-19) and Dnevnik[[20]](#footnote-20), as well as the internet portals Vojvodina Uživo[[21]](#footnote-21), 24 sedam[[22]](#footnote-22), 025.rs[[23]](#footnote-23), Srpski portal[[24]](#footnote-24), 024 info[[25]](#footnote-25), Gradske info[[26]](#footnote-26), Novosadska TV[[27]](#footnote-27), TV Pančevo[[28]](#footnote-28) and RTV Vranje[[29]](#footnote-29). In these articles, the findings of the monitoring were incompletely presented in relation to the reporting of the news program N1, accompanied by a labeling of BIRODI.

In the three online editions of daily newspapers, only the BIRODI monitoring results regarding the coverage of the N1 news program were published. These results specifically focused on the percentages of negative and positive portrayal of Aleksandar Vučić as the President of Serbia, while omitting data on neutral portrayal. Instead of accurately reporting the negative coverage percentage (59.9%), these three media outlets rounded it to 60%, which was interpreted negatively in both the headline and the text. The findings presented suggest that the N1 news program portrayed the President of Serbia at the highest acceptable level of negative reporting, reflecting N1's critical/questioning approach. Additionally, there was a noticeable absence of (self) promotion of Vučić, as he was only portrayed positively for 0.5% of the time.

The high percentage of negative tone in reporting on the President of the Republic as a public official is in line with the Declaration on Freedom of Political Debate. "This document unequivocally states that holders of public office or candidates for such offices are not more protected in the process of public communication than other citizens; on the contrary, due to their own decision to apply for public offices that bring status, privileges, and greater influence, they are more exposed to views, criticism, satire, which is completely legitimate" (quote from "A Little Primer on Democracy," Rade Veljanovski, daily newspaper Danas with the support of the OSCE Mission to Serbia).

From this standpoint, depicting the President of the Republic with a mere 0.5% positive coverage, as mentioned in the text, represents the minimum threshold for acceptable positive reporting. Essentially, N1's news program, which predominantly adopts a critical or neutral stance, serves as a counterbalance to television stations with nationwide coverage that portray the President of Serbia with over 90% positive coverage. This, to some extent, contributes to the diversity of media perspectives within the realm of news programs.

It is worth noting that three online news portals failed to acknowledge the fact that President Vučić received 39.6% neutral coverage in N1's news reports. This information is crucial in evaluating the integrity of N1's reporting, as it indicates that President Vučić himself, or those discussing him, were presented with impartial and fact-based information.

N1's portrayal of the opposition is widely perceived as excessively favorable. In accordance with the Declaration of Freedom of Political Debate and domestic laws, N1 must address this issue by reducing the significant amount of positive coverage given to opposition parties. This can be accomplished by diversifying the pool of guests, incorporating new sources, and encouraging journalists to adopt a more analytical and critical approach when reporting on the opposition. For N1 to achieve a more balanced reporting tone, it will be beneficial that the leaders of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) refrain from violating Article 51 of the Serbian Constitution and grant interviews to N1 journalists without any bias. Such a change would likely result in a rise in neutral and, particularly, negative coverage of opposition parties.

The same recommendation applies to national television channels, where opposition parties received over 90% negative coverage. This partly stems from the fact that some opposition parties refuse to appear on these channels due to their history of heavily negative coverage.

The media product containing and interpreting BIRODI's monitoring findings appeared in three media outlets with nearly identical titles, subtitles, and text. This raises concerns about media pluralism within these outlets and necessitates a response from the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications, pursuant to Article 55.

Once again, the same media outlets labeled BIRODI without providing it with the opportunity to refute the label or offer its interpretation of the presented monitoring findings. These findings are in line with those of the ODIHR Observation Mission, as well as with the REM findings regarding N1 during the 2023 campaign period.

MEDIA SMEAR CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE BUREAU FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH

This is a short case study of the media smear campaign targeting BIRODI. We shall first identify who is being smeared and who the smearers are. The central part will focus on the strategic methods used in this smear campaign. It is important to emphasize that the intention of this mini-analysis is not to create a new cycle of smear tactics (smearing the smearers), but rather to highlight an established practice that is detrimental to democratic principles and media culture.

The Smeared and the Smearers

Both BIRODI and its executive director, Zoran Gavrilović, are being alternately smeared. Since the next section will focus on BIRODI, here we present the narrative formulas strictly linked to Zoran Gavrilović. He is mocked with a rhyming phrase "specialist-metalist", while simultaneously being portrayed as a judge (for the media/journalists). The narrative suggests that Gavrilović, acting like a biased judge, does not hesitate to formulate questions himself and then hand them to journalists. Finally, as befits a judge in this analogy, he allegedly cites relevant laws and delivers verdicts in the media arena. Given this portrayal, it is no surprise they attribute arrogance to the executive director of BIRODI.

In the smear campaign's narrative, Zoran Gavrilović is paired with the leader of the Freedom and Justice Party. The narrative suggests that not only does Gavrilović follow Đilas' supposed wrong path, but they are essentially complementary in their efforts. While Đilas uses populist tricks, BIRODI's executive director, portrayed as a sort of false Prometheus, employs research simulations. Gavrilović's alleged lack of expertise does not prevent him from having a "sacred cow" status according to the smear campaign. Further mocking in their narrative, they refer to Zoran Gavrilović as "Mr. BIRODI". They claim he is not just any Mr. BIRODI, but rather a "hybrid warrior."

The media smear campaign against BIRODI unfolded on three national television channels: B92, Happy, and Pink[[30]](#footnote-30). Pink TV played a leading role in terms of frequency and intensity compared to the other two channels. On Pink TV, the smear campaign primarily took place within their morning program. The host of Pink TV's morning program played a key role in the smear campaign's narrative. His guests, to varying degrees, participated in this narrative. These guests included both journalists and political analysts. On B92, smear tactics were present in their "Fokus" program, while on Happy TV, it was on their morning program.

 Smear Formula

I (Un)hidden Editorial Hand or On BIRODI's Media Omnipotence

The central smear tactic suggests that BIRODI edits or controls the media. However, it is unclear whether the smearers claim BIRODI merely tries to influence or oversee the media, or if they believe BIRODI is so powerful that the media is already under its (hidden) editorial control/supervision. In this context, they even mention some fabricated BIRODI manuals supposedly used to design journalistic questions. The smear campaign doesn't stop there. They allege that BIRODI initiates witch hunts against media outlets and journalists, and ultimately advocates for censorship. According to the smear narrative, BIRODI's censorship aspirations go beyond the media. They accuse BIRODI of trying to deny Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić the right to engage in politics.

II Anti-People Element or About False Elitism

The verdict is strong and definitive: BIRODI humiliates the people. This alleged humiliation of the people is a natural consequence of the hatred BIRODI supposedly harbors towards the people. They even include BIRODI among those who embody a false elitism, and the presence of such elitism is, of course, an anti-people stance. In addition to being anti-people, the smearers throw around two more negative labels: anti-democratic and anti-state. Given this portrayal, it is not surprising that they also insinuate that BIRODI is linked to the US intelligence service.

III Deficient Research Ethos

From a research standpoint, BIRODI's monitoring practices are, at the very least, questionable. The smear campaign alleges flaws in every stage of BIRODI’s research, from methodology and sample selection to the possibility of verifying the findings. They claim BIRODI's monitoring serves non-research purposes and is misused or susceptible to misuse. In short, the smearers claim BIRODI lacks the necessary expertise, which is just one reason, according to them, to deny them any integrity.

IV Who Does BIRODI Really Work For?

Beyond the alleged lack of expertise, BIRODI's integrity is further undermined by claims that their monitoring activities serve two key non-research purposes. Firstly, the smear campaign suggests BIRODI has a petty political function and is collaborating with the opposition. The smearers do not leave any doubt about which opposition figure they think BIRODI is working with, predictably mentioning the leader of the Freedom and Justice Party. Secondly, they claim BIRODI's monitoring is tailored to justify or gain support from their donors. According to the smear narrative, BIRODI's criticisms of the Republican Electoral Commission's (REM) work (or lack of it) are motivated by self-interest.

V Playing the Victim

The smearers establish a causal link between obtaining donor support and playing the martyr. They imply that BIRODI pretends to be a victim, all in order to secure new donations. To prevent BIRODI from exploiting this strategy any further, they suggest that the media should simply ignore BIRODI.

Conclusion

The media portrayal of the Bureau for Social Research is in stark contrast to the reality of the indisputable facts. First, BIRODI's reports on media monitoring during the elections were repeatedly cited by opposition political actors, both before and after the May 2012 elections. Second, BIRODI was subjected to varying degrees of pressure both before and after 2012. However, the pressure before the May 2012 elections was significantly less in scope and intensity than the pressure since 2019. Third, BIRODI's findings from media monitoring of the elections are consistent with the findings of media monitoring by the ODIHR observation mission.[[31]](#footnote-31) BIRODI's recommendations have even been incorporated into ODIHR's recommendations, and the results of these joint monitoring efforts have been presented at ODIHR conferences.

After analyzing the media for over a decade, BIRODI has become the target of media smear campaign. The only reason for this smear campaign is that BIRODI has asked the REM, the relevant government agency, to determine whether a by-law, the Rulebook on Protection of Human Rights in the Provision of Media Services, is being violated. This rulebook is based on the Law on Public Information and Media, the Law on Public Media Services and the Law on Electronic Media, all of which are concretizations of Article 51 of the Serbian Constitution, which guarantees complete, truthful and timely information.

BIRODI is subjected to a kind of media retaliation by media outlets that function like a perpetual motion machine for producing legitimacy for the power and personal authority of President Aleksandar Vučić. One of their key tasks is to prevent any penalties for the constant media law violations committed by Aleksandar Vučić himself. The REM and the Anti-Corruption Agency are the primary bodies responsible for sanctioning such violations. Anyone who dares to point out these facts with evidence must inevitably expect retaliation from the media.



The case of the Bureau for Social Research is a clear illustration of how far Serbian media (and political) culture is from being exemplary. False accusations, inaccurate information, vulgarity, *ad hominem* attacks, and stigmatization have become deeply ingrained in our media (and public sphere). Furthermore, the target of this mistreatment is not even given the chance to respond in the media outlets that are generating this distorted media/public image.

1. https://www.rem.rs/uploads/files/Podzakonska%20regulativa/Pravilnik%20o%20zastiti%20ljudskih%20prava%20u%20oblasti%20pruzanja%20medijskih%20usluga.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The media service provider shall ensure free, truthful, objective, complete, and timely information, and shall especially accurately and objectively present facts and events in news and current affairs programs and encourage the free formation of opinions.   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. If information is broadcasted in the program concerning which a particular individual has a legitimate interest to express themselves, especially if allegations of incompetence, immoral or unlawful conduct are made, or if it involves a discussion that includes a conflict of opinions or views, the media service provider is obliged to provide the opportunity for that individual to respond to the published information or to participate in the discussion on an equal basis. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://pink.rs/politika/573194/sraman-nastavak-operacije-zabraniti-vucica-tajkunski-mediji-traze-kazne-zbog-intervjua-sa-predsednikom-srbije> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2024&mm=02&dd=18&nav_category=11&nav_id=2483943> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/871796/traze-kazne-zbog-intervjua-sa-predsednikom-srbije/vest> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/876852/birodi-aleksandar-vucic-tv-prva-intervju> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1334722/nastavlja-operacija-zabraniti-vucica-pogledajte-novi-bizarni-zahtev-nemocnog-aparata-opozicije-foto> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.sd.rs/vesti/info/tajkunski-mediji-bi-da-vrate-zuti-medijski-mrak-u-srbiju-traze-da-se-kazni-tv-prva-zbog-intervjua-2024-02-18> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://srpskiportal.rs/politika/nastavlja-se-operacija-uklanjanja-vucica-sa-cela-drzave/240734/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.postinfo.rs/djilas-i-njegovi-saradnici-pokusavaju-da-zabrane-vucica/> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://nsuzivo.rs/srbija/tajkunski-mediji-bi-da-vrate-zuti-medijski-mrak-u-srbiju-traze-da-se-kazni-tv-prva-zbog-intervjua> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://www.republika.rs/vesti/politika/516253/tajkunski-mediji-zele-mrak-u-srbiji> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <https://www.birodi.rs/birodi-trazimo-od-minisistarstva-za-informisanje-i-telekomunikacije-da-pokrene-postupak-utvdjivanja-krsenja-medijskog-pluralizma-u-oblasti-dnevne-stampe/> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <https://www.birodi.rs/pismo-rts-dostavljamo-analize-koje-treba-da-pomognu-potpunom-istinitom-i-pravovremenom-infomisanju-gradjana/> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://mc.rs/koalicija-za-integritet-nadlezni-da-reaguju-zbog-medijskog-linca-birodi-ja/za-medije/detaljno/7186> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://4integrity.org/ana-brnabic-izgovorila-neistine-o-koaliciji-za-integritet-i-pokazala-kakav-je-njen-integritet/> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/878514/birodi-potvrdio-medijski-teror-n1-vucicu-05-odsto-pozitivnih-priloga-a-dilasovcima-nula-negativnih/vest> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/881935/briodi-teror-n1-vucic> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. <https://www.dnevnik.rs/politika/24sedam-birodi-potvrdio-na-n1-vucicu-05-odsto-pozitivnih-priloga-dilasovcima-nula> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. <https://vojvodinauzivo.rs/birodi-potvrdio-medijski-teror-n1-vucicu-05-odsto-pozitivnih-priloga-dilasovcima-nula-negativnih/> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. <https://24sedam.rs/ostavi-komentar/politika/vesti/285804/birodi-konstatovao-nezapamcenu-pristrasnost-n1/vest> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. <https://www.025.rs/tag/birodi/> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. <https://srpskiportal.rs/politika/izbori-2023/medijska-manipulacija-i-ogromna-mrznja-tajkunskih-medija-svaka-sekunda-o-vucicu-na-n1-i-nova-s-negativna/197832/> [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. <https://024info.rs/vesti/birodi-potvrdio-medijski-teror-n1-vucicu-05-odsto-pozitivnih-priloga-djilasovcima-nula-negativnih/> [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. <https://gradskeinfo.rs/birodi-potvrdio-medijski-teror-n1-vucicu-05-odsto-pozitivnih-priloga-djilasovcima-nula-negativnih-05-03-2024/> [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. <https://novosadska.tv/2024/03/05/birodi-potvrdio-medijski-teror-n1-vucicu-05-odsto-pozitivnih-priloga-djilasovcima-nula-negativnih/> [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. <https://rtvpancevo.rs/2024/03/05/birodi-potvrdio-medijski-teror-n1-vucicu-05-odsto-pozitivnih-priloga-djilasovcima-nula-negativnih/> [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. <https://rtv-vranje.rs/birodi-potvrdio-medijski-teror-n1-vucicu-05-odsto-pozitivnih-priloga-djilasovcima-nula-negativnih/> [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. As already mentioned, the smear campaign also found its place on the cable channel Informer. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/serbia [↑](#footnote-ref-31)