

NGOs and Media: The Price of Criticism – SLAPP

Lawsuits, Public Discrediting and Political Pressures

The targeting of journalists and civil society organizations is not only about attacks against individuals doing their jobs; it strikes at the core of fundamental human rights and the bedrock principles of a democratic society.

Both media and civil society organizations have the role of public watchdogs – actors that critically scrutinize the work of institutions, expose abuses, and demand accountability. In a society aspiring to democratic progress, they must not be targets but rather partners in upholding the public interest. An attack against them indicates not only institutional weakness but also sends out a political signal that attempts are being made to curb independence, critical perspectives, and public engagement.

These freedoms transcend a national issue – they are clearly defined and safeguarded by international standards, including the European Convention on Human Rights. Freedom of expression, freedom of association, and the operation of non-governmental organizations are standards that Montenegro is not only bound to uphold but has also enshrined in its constitution.

However, the reality on the ground tells a different story. European Commission reports consistently note a stagnant state regarding media freedom, journalist safety, and the environment in which the civil sector operates. This is clearly manifested through deliberate targeting, abuses of the judicial system, financial pressures, and public discredit. All of these actions point to a systematic pattern of constricting the space for public action.

The environment where critical voices are increasingly subjected to systematic attacks is shaped by institutional pressures, the abuse of the judicial system, targeting via media affiliated with certain political structures, and orchestrated disinformation campaigns.

The examples provided further in this report should be understood in this light, as they vividly illustrate how attacking one actor sends a message to all: that expressing criticism comes at a price.

Discreditation Campaigns: “NGOs Against the Church”

The activities of organizations advocating for the secular character of the state are increasingly being framed as alleged anti-traditionalism and “ideological engineering.”

Such narratives are further fueled by a media matrix rooted in conspiracy theories and the labeling of those that hold differing views.

The day after it was made public that the Bijelo Polje High State Prosecutor’s Office had initiated an inquiry into the speech by Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Budimlje–Niksic Diocese Metodije, the [IN4S](#) portal published an article that targeted multiple independent media outlets and organizations, and fabricated a depiction of “an orchestrated hysteria against the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian people.”

Metodije, among other things, stated that “a Titoist–Ustasha coalition has reigned since the end of World War II, committing genocide against the Serbian people,” and that Chetnik leaders Dragoljub Mihailovic and Pavle Djuriscic were “the first guerrillas in Europe that rose against fascists,” but that “truths about them were later obscured by lies.” SPC Metropolitan Joanikije made similar claims.

Non-governmental organizations and civic activists strongly denounced and voiced their concern over the remarks made by Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro and the Littoral, in which he glorifies Pavle Djuriscic, commander of the Chetnik movement in Montenegro and a proven war criminal. They sought a clear position from the state prosecutor’s office on whether the glorification of the Chetnik movement in Montenegro amounts to sanctionable hate speech, a request that subsequently became the pretext for attacking the civil sector.

Similarly to IN4S, the [Alo Online](#) portal targeted Zlatko Vujovic, labeling him a “paid lapdog”, labelling him as an opponent of the church over his statement that the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) holds authority superior to the state.

These go beyond mere attempts to delegitimize the NGO sector; they are open calls for the stigmatization of individuals that are engaged in social dialogue and expose violations of constitutional and democratic principles. This is an ongoing strategy aimed at stifling critical thinking and intimidating those that act in the public interest.

Civil society organizations, especially those scrutinizing the executive branch operations, remain targets of a sustained campaign on the Borba portal and other media platforms affiliated with the Montenegrin and Serbian regimes.

Alo Online [targeted](#) CDT Program Director Milica Kovacevic over her urging state authorities to regulate the digital space, claiming that “under the guise of ‘combating disinformation,’ Kovacevic seeks to impose European law (DSA) on a non-EU member state, without any democratic process, public consultaion, or political consensus.”

Disparagement and insults against all those that think differently have become the modus operandi in Montenegro. For instance, [the aforementioned Borba.me portal refers to former Minister of European Integration and current NGO activist Jovana Marovic as an “NGO spinster”](#) who, as they claim, by criticizing the government, branded the Serbian people in Montenegro as malevolent.

However, Marović had in fact merely criticized the performance of the current government during a conference in Podgorica.

Apart from being a misogynistic attack, this and similar targeting efforts aim to silence societal critics and reduce them to mere observers of events in the country.

In addition to discrediting NGOs in public discourse, formal mechanisms are also being employed to discourage their work.

[MP Miodrag Lakovic’s impending lawsuit against the MANS organization](#), based on his claims of having been targeted by this NGO, poses a threat to the civil sector’s freedom of action, as criticism directed at public officials is being reshaped into grounds for legal persecution.

MANS accused Lakovic of withholding critical information from international partners about drug consignments that were consistently shipped into Kotor over many years during his time as a key figure in the Anti-Drug Sector from 2004 to 2015. Lakovic, in turn, urged the Special State Prosecutor’s Office to investigate into MANS’s allegations.

When Authorities Target the Media

In addition to non-governmental organizations, journalists and media outlets have also become targets of public attacks. A prominent example is ruling party MP Boris Bogdanovic's public accusation, made without evidence, that journalists from several outlets are on the payroll of criminal organizations, a tactic indicative of a wider targeting strategy designed to discredit and intimidate. The reaction by the relevant Minister of Culture and Media Tamara Vujovic, who (coincidentally or not) comes from the same party as MP Bogdanovic, was rather underwhelming and questionable.

The Minister thus claims that "the protection of media freedom does not imply anyone's right to be exempt from public and political criticism, especially when it pertains to phenomena that can prevent harmful consequences for society."

Such narratives, adopted and disseminated by web portals affiliated with certain political groups, foster an environment where journalists are treated as legitimate targets, thereby seriously jeopardizing the safety and integrity of the journalistic profession.

Deputy Prime Minister Nik Djeljosaj was convicted of defaming TV Vijesti journalist Danilo Ajkovic and is mandated to pay him damages in a first-instance ruling of the Basic Court.

Djeljosaj had directed insults at Ajkovic and TV Vijesti in response to a segment concerning the ruling majority's parliamentary decision not to revoke his immunity over criminal charges of inciting resistance.

Djeljosaj went on to accuse the prosecutor, the judge, and the journalist of, as he put it, having taken money for their actions.

"I hope it will one day be revealed whether they took money for what they are doing or if they are colluding with their instigator out of sheer hatred? This is a blatant example of how institutions and a journalist exploit their roles to settle scores with a politician," Djeljosaj wrote at the time.

Amidst a barrage of insults directed at TV Vijesti journalist Danilo Ajkovic, the deputy prime minister added that the day would come when, as he stated, this trio would have to answer for their wrongdoings.

Following the first-instance decision, Ajkovic concluded that the court had indeed established a classic case of defamation against him as a journalist, and that this ruling marked a substantial contribution to the fight for the dignity of the journalistic profession.

SLAPP Lawsuits as an Instrument of Intimidation

One of the most serious instruments of pressure on the media is the practice of filing so-called SLAPP lawsuits (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) – legal actions that, though often without legal basis, are used to exhaust media resources and deter critical reporting. [Andrej Vucic's lawsuit against daily "Vijesti" for publishing excerpts from a Europol report detailing ties between politicians and criminals](#), is a prime example of this tactic.

"Vijesti" published a series of excerpts from correspondence that members of criminal organizations were exchanging via the SKY application, where some politicians' names were dropped, including that of Andrej Vucic, the brother of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic.

Despite the fact that the journalistic work was data-driven and of relevance to the public interest, this legal mechanism was weaponized as a tool of repression against the editorial team.

These cases send a message to the broader journalistic community – that disclosing information which challenges political and business elites carries substantial professional and personal risk.



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