

UNDER PRESSURE:

SERBIAN MEDIA REPORTING ON
ORGANISED CRIME AND CORRUPTION

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Executive Summary

The reporting of mainstream Serbian media on organised crime and corruption has become heavily instrumentalised by the ruling elite. At the heart of this instrumentalisation is a desire by the ruling parties to maintain power using methods which go well beyond those considered acceptable in consolidated democracies.

Key findings

- Organised crime and corruption reporting is heavily instrumentalised by the ruling elite in order to exert political pressure and maintain power
- Access to information for journalists varies according to the political affiliation of the media outlet
- The official narrative of successes in fighting corruption remains largely unchallenged by most mainstream media

By instrumentalising media reporting on this topic, the ruling parties seek to mobilise and retain popular support by constructing a positive narrative about their successes in tackling organised crime and corruption. Media reporting is visibly used to attack and discredit opponents and critics of the government, real or potential, and in some cases even to exert political pressure over close coalition partners. Not least, media reporting often serves to exert pressure on Serbia's prosecutors and

judiciary, particularly with the goal of ensuring the desired outcome in certain investigations and court cases.

A key element in 'managing' media reporting on organised crime and corruption lies in providing asymmetrical access to information to different media outlets. Particularly when it comes to politically-significant cases, information is systematically leaked to pro-government media, particularly tabloids, from senior political sources, most frequently in the Interior Ministry. The message is then typically amplified by pro-government electronic media. While pro-government media appear to enjoy privileged access to information, media outlets critical of the government face numerous obstacles in accessing information, formal and informal.

The official narrative of successfully fighting organised crime and corruption remains largely unchallenged in the mainstream media, most of which appear to be directly in the service of the government or under

strong financial pressure to refrain from substantive criticism and scrutiny. While there is a genuine need for better training and education in order to increase the capacities of media to report on organised crime and corruption, this was not identified as the main factor preventing Serbian media from reporting professionally on this topic.

Methodology

For the purposes of this report, BIRN conducted a total of 21 interviews. Of these, 18 were in-depth interviews conducted in person, two in writing (via email), and one took the form of questions asked at a press conference. Those interviewed included seven journalists and editors, two active judges and two former judges, two active prosecutors, one retired senior police officer, one lawyer, one MP from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party and one former member of the ruling party, one opposition politician and four experts from the worlds of academia and civil society. Four of the interviewees – one active judge, one prosecutor and two journalists – asked to be quoted anonymously. Interviews were requested from the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Justice, but no answer was received. The statements provided by interviewees have been carried as their views and observations, rather than as proven facts.

BIRN carried out media monitoring of six different media outlets in the period between April 3 and June 30, 2017. Four outlets from the daily print media were chosen along with two national television stations. The monitoring was restricted to reporting that involved official investigations, arrests and court proceedings. The printed outlets were the daily newspapers Blic, Danas, Informer and Politika, while the electronic media were the national public broadcaster – Radio-Television Serbia (RTS) 1 – and one commercial television station with a national frequency, TV Pink. The reporting of electronic media was monitored during prime-time hours.

The selected media outlets were chosen in order to ensure an equal representation of different editorial policies and styles, both in terms of ‘tabloid’-style journalism (Informer and TV Pink), semi-tabloid (Blic) and non-tabloid (RTS, Politika, Danas), as well as a representative mix of media which are openly or more subtly pro-government, independent or critical. The results of the media monitoring are presented in this report and its accompanying annex.

1. Background

The media play a key role in informing the public and shaping public debate in modern democracies. They select events and themes which do (or do not) receive public attention, place them within a specific framework and give them a certain meaning. Crucially, they help – or should help – the public to better understand events and processes which may be complex, distant or not easily intelligible to them such as organised crime and corruption.

Yet the independence and professionalism of Serbian media are under severe pressure. According to Freedom House’s Nations in Transit rankings, the Serbian media’s independence has been in steady decline, particularly since 2013.

The role of media reporting on organised crime and corruption is all the more important given the scale of the problem that these two issues pose in Serbia and the wider region. Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index 2016 ranked Serbia 72nd out of 176 jurisdictions worldwide. Improving the rule of law and fighting organised crime and corruption are also among the biggest hurdles on Serbia’s path towards EU accession.

Serbia’s National Strategy for the Fight Against Organised Crime, adopted in 2009, recognised the role of media and civil society in combatting organised crime. It states that the “media and its unquestionable influence on society definitely represent a significant, almost compelling factor in the fight against organised crime by unbiased reporting”. It also stresses that reporting should not “affect the court proceedings against organised crime groups and perpetrators”.

The strategy points out that “the nature and financial power of organised crime imposes a constant danger of influencing the media with the aim of shaping public opinion and redirecting the attention of the public away from the activities of some organised criminal groups”.

The European Commission’s progress report on Serbia for 2016¹ stresses that leaks to the media about ongoing police and prosecutorial investigations “continued to occur frequently” and that such practices hamper investigations and are a breach of the presumption of innocence.

¹ The entire document can be accessed here https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2016/20161109_report_serbia.pdf

2. Media Instrumentalisation

The reporting of Serbian media on organised crime and corruption is heavily instrumentalised, primarily by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, SNS, in order to maintain power, mobilise support and exert political pressure on both its political opponents and members of the Serbian judiciary and prosecution. On certain occasions in the recent past, media reporting on these topics has also been used by public prosecutors and police officers in order to defend themselves from political pressure (or orders) to drop certain investigations into individuals close to the ruling elite.

Political Power Struggles

All but two of BIRN's interviewees agreed that political influence played a key role in how Serbian media report on organised crime and corruption. According to Jovanka Matic, a media analyst and research associate at the Institute of Social Sciences in Belgrade working on the media, the manner in which the mainstream media devote attention to certain topics has all the elements of well-prepared political marketing.

On a broader level, the instrumentalisation of media reporting on organized crime and corruption helps the ruling elite to maintain power and mobilise popular support by “systematically constructing a positive image of itself” according to Matic.

Certain media – above all the tabloids *Informer* and *Srpski Telegraf*, as well as TV Pink and Happy TV – have precisely defined roles within a well-oiled propaganda machine, said Matic.

This same propaganda machine, argues Matic, ensures that certain themes and cases – those involving opponents of the government – are given an extremely high level of attention, while others – involving the government or those close to it – are largely neglected.

Rather than informing the public about criminality and corruption or combating it, Matic argues that this reporting is being used for the pur-

pose of destroying the credibility of individuals or organisations which represent a potential threat to the current government.

Organised crime was the theme of one of the most bizarre recent attacks on opponents of the government in Serbia. It was directed at Natasa Jeremic, the wife of opposition politician Vuk Jeremic.

In the presidential elections held on April 2, 2017, Aleksandar Vucic, the joint candidate of the ruling SNS and the Socialist Party of Serbia, SPS, faced ten opposition candidates, among them former Serbian Foreign Minister Jeremic.

On March 20, 2017, at the height of the election campaign, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party issued a statement by Milenko Jovanov, vice-president of the party's central committee, in which Jovanov claimed that "the biggest criminal gang in Serbia is in Vuk Jeremic's entourage" while "the entire narcotics market in Serbia is controlled by his wife, Natasa Jeremic".²

Published late in the evening on March 20, the statement was carried in its original form by state news agency Tanjug and the websites of media outlets such as B92, Pink, Kurir and Informer, as well as by online media such as Teleprompter and Srbija Danas. The Beta news agency also carried a version of the statement.

The following day, SNS leader and presidential candidate Aleksandar Vucic apologised to the Serbian public for the attack on his opponent's family member, although not Natasa Jeremic herself, adding that his own family had been the focus of frequent political attacks.³

While Vucic apologized for the initial attack on Natasa Jeremic, the original accusation nevertheless generated an avalanche of reporting on the subject. In the period from March 20-25, 2017, a total of 367 relevant reports were identified in the Serbian media – 60 in the printed media, 65 in the electronic media and 242 online reports – which carried a mix of the original accusations against Natasa Jeremic, Vucic's apology and the reac-

² The entire press statement, signed by senior SNS official Milenko Jovanov, can be accessed here: <https://www.sns.org.rs/novosti/saopstenja/jovanov-najveca-kriminalna-banda-je-u-okruzenju-vuka-jeremica-na-celu-sa-sefom>

³ The entire press statement can be accessed here: <https://www.sns.org.rs/novosti/saopstenja/vucic-u-ime-pristojne-i-normalne-srbije-u-licno-ime-izvinjavam-se-svim-gradjanima>

tions of the Jeremic couple.⁴ In this way, the clearly fabricated accusations against Natasa Jeremic were able to reach the widest public.

Another opposition politician who has recently been the target of tabloid smear campaigns is Dragan Djilas, the former mayor of Belgrade and former Democratic Party leader. Following his recent announcement that he was returning to politics and running for mayor in next year's Belgrade city elections, government-friendly tabloids such as Informer once again began to accuse Djilas of involvement in corruption and various other scandals.⁵

The tabloid Informer even carried SNS press statements linking Djilas and opposition politician Vuk Jeremic to organised crime figures⁶.

⁴ The numbers are based on a media clipping conducted for the period March 20-25, 2017, for BIRN.

⁵ "Stefanović: Svi znaju politiku Đilasa, Jankovića i Šapića, oni bi da isprazne džepove Beograđana i napune svoje" [Stefanovic: Everyone knows the policies of Djilas, Jankovic and Sapic, they want to empty Belgraders' pockets and fill their own], Informer, 20 January 2017, see: <http://informer.rs/vesti/politika/361601/stefanovic-svi-zanju-politiku-dilasa-jankovica-i-sapica-oni-bi-da-isprazne-dzepove-beogradana-i-napune-svoje>; "Jovičić: Đilas je medijski tajkun lopovskih navika" [Jovicic: Djilas is a media tycoon with criminal habits], Informer, 18 January 2017, <http://informer.rs/vesti/politika/361337/jovicic-dilas-je-medijski-tajkun-lopovskih-navika>; "Ekskluzivno, Sreten Jocić, kontroverzno svedočenje iz zatvora: Ratko Knežević srušio Đinđića i Pukanića, uz pomoć Rodića i Đilasa krenuo na Vučića" [Exclusive, Sreten Jovic, controversial testimony from prison: Ratko Knezevic toppled Djindjic and Pukanic, with the help of Djilas and Rodic going after Pukanic], Ekspres, 15 June 2017, see: <http://www.ekspres.net/brejkning/kriminal/sreten-jocic-kontroverzno-svedocenje-iz-zatvora-ratko-knezevic-srusio-dindjica-i-pukanica-uz-pomoc-rodica-i-dilasa-krenuo-na-vucica>; "Vesić: Đilas bi da završi započetu pljačku građana" [Vesic: Djilas would like to complete the plundering of citizens], Informer, 19 October 2017, see: <http://informer.rs/vesti/politika/353499/vesic-dilas-bi-da-zavrsi-zapocetu-pljacku-gradana>; "Vesić: 'Mali i ja nikad nećemo biti lopovi kao Đilas'" [Vesic: Mali and me will never be crooks like Djilas], Blic, 26 September 2017, see: <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/beograd/vesic-mali-i-ja-nikad-necemo-biti-lopovi-kao-djilas/ne9knmh>; "Teška muljaža! Evo kako su Dragan Đilas i njegova ekipa kupovinom Španskih tramvaja u crno zavili GSP Beograd" [Extremely murky! Here is how Dragan Djilas and his crew wrapped in black GSP Beograd by buying the Spanish trams], Informer, 9 July 2017, see: <http://informer.rs/vesti/beograd/339236/teska-muljaza-evo-kako-su-dragan-dilas-i-njegova-ekipa-kupovinom-spanskih-tramvaja-u-crno-zavili-gsp-beograd>

⁶ "SNS: Tajkunsko kriminalna banda bi da spreči razvoj Beograda" [SNS: Tycoon criminal gang would like to prevent the development of Belgrade], Informer, 22 December 2017, see: <http://informer.rs/vesti/politika/361983/sns-tajkunsko-kriminalna-banda-bi-da-spreci-razvoj-beograda>

Another line of attack sought to link Djilas with businessman Miroslav Miskovic, who has been accused of and tried for corruption in the past, claiming that Djilas wanted Miskovic's help to win power.⁷

In October 2017, Djilas claimed that he had received warnings that he would be arrested if he decided to run for mayor in the Belgrade city elections.⁸

This was not the first time that government-friendly tabloids had taken part in seemingly orchestrated campaigns against Djilas. From the middle of 2012 until May 2014, pro-government tabloids ran a constant campaign to discredit him.

In early 2013, the Association of Independent Electronic Media, ANEM, concluded in its first annual issue of Legal Monitoring of the Serbian Media Scene that "it is clear [tabloid] Kurir has been waging an overt and dirty campaign against him [Djilas] for months".⁹

The campaign appeared to be synchronised with the efforts of the ruling SNS to unseat Djilas from the post of mayor of Belgrade, which it succeeded in doing in September 2013. Yet the media attacks on Djilas continued until May 2014, at which point he was replaced by Bojan Pajtic as leader of

7 "Vučić o Đilas, Šapiću i Miškoviću: Oni su izgubili privilegije" [Vučić regarding Djilas, Sapic and Miskovic: They lost their privileges], Informer, 14 December 2017, see: <http://informer.rs/vesti/politika/360843/vucic-o-dilasu-sapicu-i-miskovicu-oni-su-izgubili-privilegije>; "Trojni pakt! Mišković, Đilas i Šapić otimaju vlast u Beogradu! Kreće žestok medijsko politički udar na vlast" [Three way pact! Miskovic, Djilas and Sapic taking power in Belgrade! Fierce media and political attack on government beginning], Informer, 13 December 2017, see: <http://informer.rs/vesti/politika/360606/trojni-pakt-miskovic-dilas-i-sapic-otimaju-vlast-u-beogradu-krece-zestok-medijsko-politicki-udar-na-vlast>; "Istražujemo: Ko su ljudi koji hoće da preuzmu vlast u Srbiji – Tajkuni otimaju državu glume poštenje a kriju milione" [We investigate: Who are the people who want to take power in Serbia – Tycoons seizing the state, feigning honesty and hiding millions], Informer, 13 November 2017, see: <http://informer.rs/vesti/politika/356940/istrazujemo-ko-su-ljudi-koji-hoce-da-preuzmu-vlast-u-srbiji-tajkuni-otimaju-drzavu-glume-postenje-a-kriju-milione>; "Pale sve maske! Počela prljava kampanja pred izbore u Beogradu – Mišković i Đilas pokrenuli totalni rat" [Masks have fallen! Dirty campaign begins ahead of elections in Belgrade – Miskovic and Djilas begin total war], Informer, 6 October 2017, see: <http://informer.rs/vesti/politika/351620/pale-sve-maske-pocela-prljava-kampanja-pred-izbore-u-beogradu-miskovic-i-dilas-pokrenuli-totalni-rat>

8 "Danas: Đilas prete hapšenjem ako bude kandidat opozicije" [Danas: Djilas threatened with arrest if he becomes opposition candidate], TV N1, 4 October 2017, see: <http://rs.n1info.com/a332701/Vesti/Vesti/Danas-Hapsenje-Djilasa-ukoliko-bude-kandidat-opozicije.html>

9 Legal Monitoring of the Serbian Media Scene – Report for January-February 2013, ANEM, p.9, report available at: <http://www.anem.org.rs/en/aktivnostiAnema/monitoring/story/14586/FORTY-FIRST+ANEM+MONITORING+REPORT.html>

the Democratic Party. Following his withdrawal from politics, the tabloid campaign against Djilas largely ceased as well, up until his recent return to politics.

Media reporting on corruption can be used to keep even the SNS's own coalition partners in check, as two journalists from tabloid newspapers interviewed by BIRN noted.

Ratko Femic, a former editor at Kurir¹⁰, claimed that certain corruption scandals – such as those involving alleged mismanagement in the formerly state-owned Galenika pharmaceutical company by Socialist Party-appointed officials – are periodically recycled when the SNS wants to pressure the Socialists and their leader Ivica Dacic.

Another case in which media reporting has been visibly used for political ends relating to Dacic is the investigation of the Saric drug clan and the trials related to it.¹¹

A journalist from a Belgrade tabloid argued that when the ruling SNS needed the support of Dacic and his party for Aleksandar Vucic's presidential candidacy in the run up to the April 2017 Serbian presidential election, his newspaper avoided accentuating certain stories regarding Dacic's associates and their alleged links to the Saric clan.

The same journalist added that after the elections, when it became necessary to discredit Dacic to ensure he did not become prime minister, the story of his alleged links with the Saric clan was once again put in the spotlight:

“Today [May 2017], when Dacic is a potential candidate for prime minister,¹² this story is once again being pulled out and coming from a source in Vucic's office,” the journalist said.

10 The relationship of the tabloid newspaper Kurir with the current government has oscillated between extreme closeness and open, bitter conflict. At the time that these interviews were carried out, relations were cool.

11 In July 2015, Darko Saric and his clan members were found guilty of organized cocaine smuggling from Latin America, but the initial court sentence was quashed by the Appeals Court in Belgrade in May 2016; a re-trial was ordered and is currently under way.

12 Interview conducted at the end of May 2017.

This is just one recent example of how the story of Dacic's alleged ties to the Saric clan has been used in day-to-day political infighting within the ruling coalition.

The story was first used in early 2013 when, for days on end, tabloids such as *Informer* and *Kurir* published sensational stories that senior officials at the Interior Ministry had met with members of the Saric clan during 2008 and 2009. In the meantime, then First Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic confirmed that such meetings had occurred.¹³ Then Dacic was dealt a further blow when *Informer* "revealed" that these 'senior officials' were actually Prime Minister Dacic himself¹⁴, which he was then forced to admit.¹⁵

The scandal undermined Dacic and boosted Vucic before a new coalition agreement between the SNS and Dacic's Socialist Party, agreed at the end of July 2013, along with a cabinet reshuffle, which was finally approved in parliament at the beginning of September 2013. After parliamentary elections in 2014, Vucic then took over as prime minister from Dacic.

Pressurising the Judiciary

Media reporting on organised crime and corruption is often used to exert pressure on judges and prosecutors.

One of the most extreme examples relates to the publication of a picture of Sasa Ivanic, the prosecutor in various trials of Darko Saric and businessman Stanko Subotic Cane. Retired police officer Rodoljub Milovic, interviewed for this report, cited the publication of Ivanic's picture as an example of public prosecutors being made to feel vulnerable by the media, suggesting that this action had helped to put Ivanic in danger.

¹³ "Vučić: Imam saznanja o vezama Šarića sa funkcionerima" [Vucic: I Have Knowledge of Saric's Links with Officials], *Kurir*, 30 January 2013, see: <http://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/627959/vucic-imam-saznanja-o-vezama-sarica-s-funkcionerima>

¹⁴ "Dacic se sastajao sa narko-bosom?!" [Dacic met with narco-boss?!], *Alo*, 2 February 2013, see: <http://arhiva.alo.rs/vesti/aktuelno/dacic-se-sastajao-sa-narko-bosom/10294>

¹⁵ For a more detailed analysis of this campaign against Dacic see: Filip Svarm "Ostavka koju treba odraditi" [Resignation which needs to be worked off], *Vreme*, 7 February 2013, see: <http://www.vreme.co.rs/cms/view.php?id=1096914> ;

The Serbian Public Information Commissioner confirmed that Ivanic's photo originated from the database of the Interior Ministry, which contains the private details of all Serbian citizens.¹⁶

As far as BIRN has been able to ascertain, this particular picture of Ivanic was first published in the daily *Danas* in June 2014¹⁷ and also carried by other media outlets.¹⁸ The same picture was used again eight months later by the website *Antidot*.¹⁹

A number of judges and prosecutors who were interviewed referred to ways in which media are used to exert political pressure on judges.

Vladimir Vucinic, a former judge at the Belgrade Higher Court's Special Chamber for Organised Crime in the trial of businessman Miroslav Miskovic, noted that judges do not live and work in a political vacuum and are very well aware of the political and media expectations created regarding the outcome of particular cases.

Judge Miodrag Majic of the Belgrade Appeals Court was even more direct:

"There is no need to call anyone [a judge] directly by telephone if completely clear and unambiguous messages are sent [by politicians]...especially if a particular case is prepared in the media for months."

He further added that the net result of such a climate was that "trials are only formally *not* conducted in the media".

16 See: "Ko je odgovoran za objavljivanje fotografije tužioca iz baze MUP-a?" [Who is responsible for the publication of the prosecutor's photograph from the MUP database], *Insajder*, 13 April 2016, see: <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/720/>

17 Snezana Congradin, Lidija Valtner "Direktor Veljovic organizator sastanka sa Saricevim saradnikom" [Director Veljovic organizer of meeting with Saric's associate], *Danas*, 24 June 2014, see: http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/drustvo/direktor_veljovic_organizator_sastanka_sa_saricevim_saradnikom.55.html?news_id=284149

18 See for example: "Direktor policije Veljovic organizovao sastanak sa saradnikom Darka Sarica" [Director of police Veljovic organized meeting with associate of Darko Saric], *Telegraf*, 25 June 2014, see: <http://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/1128363-direktor-policije-veljovic-organizovao-sastanak-sa-saradnikom-darka-sarica>; The text from *Danas* was also carried here in its original version <http://www.nspm.rs/hronika/danas-veljovic-organizovao-sastanak-sa-saricevim-saradnikom-na-jelovoj-gori.html?alphabet=l>

19 "Pravosuđe i mediji kao politički instrumenti" [Judiciary and media as political instruments], *Antidot*, 23 February 2015, see: <http://www.anti.media/istrazivanja/dosije/pravo-u-raljama-politike/>

In the past, police officials and prosecutors were also able to use the media, by leaking information in order to protect themselves from political pressure. According to one deputy prosecutor from a town close to Belgrade, political pressure was usually intended to get them to drop cases against individuals close to those in power. The deputy prosecutor explained:

“I talked to journalists when I needed help...to do my job according to the law, to conclude a case and protect myself from political pressure.”

Interestingly, the same deputy prosecutor noted that while such tactics could help to protect an individual from pressure until “two, three years ago”, forcing politicians to “back off”, this was no longer the case. Today, talking to the media, formally or informally, can only result in even greater political pressure being directed towards a prosecutor, the interviewee said.

3. Media Access to Information Varies According to Political Affiliation

A key way in which the media agenda is managed when it comes to reporting on organised crime and corruption is through access to information, formal and informal. While investigative journalists and independent media face significant problems gaining access to information, those outlets close to the government – particularly tabloids – appear to have privileged access, particularly to anonymous sources. While the police were far more likely to leak information than other institutions²⁰ in high-profile, politically sensitive cases, leaks appear most often to come directly from ministerial cabinets.

Dragoljub Petrovic, the editor-in-chief of Danas, a rare print daily which reports critically on the work of the current government, said that his newspaper only received a few responses to enquiries made to the police or to judicial institutions over the past year.

²⁰ See also BIRN's documentary: "Policija i medij" [Police and the Media], <http://birnsrbija.rs/dokumentarni-film-policija-i-mediji-video/>

“The Interior Ministry has not responded to a single question regarding anything, simply because, it seems to me that their press service has become the private service of [minister] Nebojsa Stefanovic... the Interior Ministry, the prosecution, we sent them some requests over the Savamala case²¹, some questions, and for the most part they did not respond to anything,” said Petrovic.

Investigative reporters noted similar problems.²² Stevan Dojcinovic, the editor of KRIK (Crime and Corruption Reporting Network), complained in particular about communications with the police, but said that the situation was somewhat better when it came to prosecutors and judges.

“It’s generally bad with the police, because I think they are under much firmer political control and then there is no will to cooperate with us. Prosecutors and judges... they are not under the same control, so a lot depends on individuals [prosecutors and judges] who work there,” said Dojcinovic.

The editor-in-chief of Danas, Dragoljub Petrovic, believes that the leaking of information is a tool which has been used particularly extensively since 2012, when the SNS came to power. He further observed that there is a clear division of labour among pro-government media, with information most frequently being leaked to tabloids.

“First tabloids are handed something, then electronic media close to the government use that and quote and say ‘as was written by Informer or Kurir’. Kurir [...] was one of the media which attacked some of the political opponents of the regime or members of the former regime, by publishing details from investigations, or maybe these were not even details from investigations but mere [...] inventions.”²³

21 During the night of April 24, 2016, masked men closed off Hercegovacka Street in the Savamala part of Belgrade, illegally bulldozing the majority of private properties on the street to clear space for the government-backed but private property development project known as Belgrade Waterfront. Those present in the area at the time were illegally detained by the men. Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic blamed senior members of the Belgrade City government for the operation. The incident came to be known as the Savamala case, with official investigations failing to identify the culprits.

22 Other BIRN investigations have confirmed this in the recent past as well, see: Maja Zivanovic, “Serbian Authorities ‘Obstructing’ Free Media, Journalists Say”, Balkan Insight, 15 November 2017, see: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbian-authorities-obstructing-free-media-journalists-say-11-13-2017>

23 Editors at Informer declined to be interviewed by BIRN as part of this research project.

Claims that pro-government media enjoy preferential access to information were usually rejected by journalists working there. Boris Vukovic, the editor of the tabloid Srpski Telegraf, widely perceived as being close to the ruling party, denied that his newspaper has a privileged status in relation to others.

Vukovic further claimed that Srpski Telegraf, like other media, is in a daily race for information and that there is no centre of power which supplies them. He also notes that his newspaper has the best cooperation with the police.

“They are always saying ‘pro-regime tabloids’, but a thousand times over, [daily newspaper] Novosti has some information which we don’t, or other tabloids, or [daily newspaper] Blic, or [tabloid] Alo ... Should we then say, ‘Those newspapers get information because they write like this or like that?’ I think that’s really absurd,” argued Vukovic.

A journalist with the daily newspaper Politika, which is partly owned by the government, also expressed her view that there were no ‘privileged’ media in Serbia who enjoy preferential access to information. She stated that Politika had good cooperation with judicial institutions:

“We mainly get the information that we need, we cultivate our contacts with representatives of state institutions, specifically the courts and prosecutor’s offices.”

‘Fear of Repercussions’

‘Fear of repercussions’ was a phrase that was often used both by judges and prosecutors when discussing whether and how they chose to communicate with the media. To begin with, they frequently stated that internal rules for communicating with the media lacked clarity or were not in place.

For example, an official Prosecution Communication Strategy for 2015–2020 was adopted during the course of 2015.²⁴ However, according to one Deputy Prosecutor from a town near Belgrade, the strategy was “a dead

²⁴ The Prosecution Communication Strategy can be accessed here: http://www.tuzilastvorz.org.rs/upload/HomeSetting/CommunicationStrategyDocument_sr/2016

letter” which was “merely used to show the European Commission that something is being implemented”.

The same interviewee also explained that until late 2015, internal instructions from the Republic Public Prosecutor’s Office (RPPPO) had stipulated that prosecutors and their deputies were not permitted to talk to the media and that all communication was to be channelled through the press service of the RPPPO. However, those instructions were withdrawn during the second half of 2015 according to the same deputy prosecutor and individual prosecutor’s offices were free to communicate with the media through their own press services.

However, the same prosecutor also added:

“Fear has crept into the public prosecution service, many have had experience, directly or through their colleagues, of what happens to those who give information to the media...”

She added that the internal, “unwritten” rules were “stay silent, don’t talk to journalists, you will only have problems”.

Leaks

The biggest asymmetry in access to information between pro-government outlets and others was not seen in responses to official requests, but when it came to *unofficial* information and leaks.

BIRN’s media monitoring identified a total of 12 articles in which anonymous sources were used – a total of 20 sources in all. Yet while the daily newspaper Danas had only one anonymous source (across 23 identified articles) during the monitored period, Blic relied on such sources eight times (across 31 identified articles), Informer seven times (across nine identified articles), while Politika relied on anonymous sources four times (across 36 identified articles). The strong reliance of the pro-government tabloid Informer on anonymous sources is particularly indicative of the situation.

Journalists, police officers, judges or prosecutors interviewed all agreed that unofficial, off-the-record information and leaks were far more likely to originate from sources in the police than in the judiciary or prosecution.

This was confirmed by retired senior police officer Rodoljub Milovic, who referred to the police as being “leaky”.

However, a number of journalists also made the point that to focus too much on which institutions were more likely to leak information was to miss the point.

According to KRIK editor Stevan Dojcinovic, information about organised crime and corruption cases is much more likely to be leaked by politicians than by police officers or prosecutors.

“There is a perception regarding excessive leaking from [state] institutions, but in fact, those who head these institutions, the [higher-ranking, non-uniformed] political part [of the force] from the director of the police ... upwards is where the leaks start,” argued Dojcinovic.

Similarly, a journalist with a Belgrade tabloid argued that the leaking of information works according to a pyramid structure. He elaborated:

“The ‘bigger’ the information, [the more likely it is to] come from the very top. Now when it comes to less important information, we can get it from the police in some local town or the prosecutor’s office. But the more important the information is and the more interest the government has in the case, then the hierarchical level [of the leak] rises to the prime minister’s office, where all important decisions are made.”

The claim that the most politically sensitive (and exclusive) information was leaked directly from ministerial offices was one that was often made by journalists, judges, prosecutors, and police officers that were interviewed by BIRN.

4. Official Narrative Remains Unchallenged

BIRN's research showed that the government's positive narrative about its efforts to fight organized crime and corruption is rarely challenged by the mainstream media, something which was evident from both the media monitoring and numerous interviews. While some media appear to be active in promoting the government, others refrain from criticism due to financial pressures – fear of losing advertising from state institutions, companies close to the government and businesses who do not want to be seen to advertise in media outlets that are critical of the government. While most interviewees acknowledged that journalists would benefit from better training in organised crime and corruption reporting, professional capacities were not seen as the primary factor undermining the quality of reporting.

Media monitoring conducted by BIRN showed that only 8 per cent of reporting presented a critical or negative picture of official attempts to fight organised crime and corruption, while 29 per cent painted a positive picture. The remaining articles were neutral in tone – reporting the basic details of cases with no assessments in terms of success or failure – but nevertheless helped to reinforce the idea that the government was doing *something* to tackle these problems.

One media outlet which stuck out particularly was TV Pink, where BIRN's media monitoring found that 23 out of 35 reports on organised crime and corruption were used to promote the success of the Interior Ministry/police or Customs Authority in fighting organised crime and corruption.

A clear example of where the mainstream media miss the chance to scrutinise and challenge this official narrative are mass arrests, which typically occur ahead of elections and involve dozens of individuals in completely unrelated cases, according to Jovanka Matic. While the media, particularly pro-government tabloids, devote a great deal of attention to such police operations, little or no attention is devoted to how many individuals are actually indicted and subsequently tried.

Former judge Vladimir Vucinic cited another very specific example. Following the assassination attempt against well-known businessman Milan Beko in November 2014, Nebojsa Stefanovic, the Interior Minister, rushed to characterise the assassins as amateurs. Vucinic noted that when, months later, no suspects had been arrested, few if any media challenged the minister as to how such ‘amateurs’ had succeeded in eluding arrest. The first suspect in this case was only arrested in July 2015.

BIRN’s media monitoring also showed a lack of analytical reporting. It found that 86 per cent of stories on organised crime and corruption arrests, investigations or trials amounted to short, factual news reports. They offered no contextualisation or analysis and merely served to communicate official statements to viewers or readers. Reporting which contained an analytical component was identified in only 10 per cent of stories.

Equally, two-thirds of reports on the topic were triggered by official statements or press conferences. By contrast, media outlets’ own initiative in reporting on this subject was identified in only a quarter of stories.

The excessive focus on the successes of the Interior Ministry and police in carrying out arrests, coupled with the uncritical media reporting of investigations and court proceedings, all helped to create expectations of convictions, particularly in high-profile cases, argued Aleksandra Ilic, an Assistant Professor at the Faculty for Security Studies of the University of Belgrade. Yet when these failed to materialise, blame could be shifted onto the judiciary, rather than those who were responsible for investigating, assembling evidence and prosecuting suspects.

According to Ilic:

“Expectations are always directed towards one outcome [convictions] and if a case lapses under the statute of limitations or there is no conviction, the court is seen as being to blame. But nobody questions the responsibility, first of the police, whose responsibility it is to gather evidence at the beginning, and then of the prosecutors, who have to use evidence to back up indictments adequately.”

Propagandists versus Reluctant Supporters

Most interviewees agreed that political control and pressure were the main reasons why media reporting did not challenge official narratives of successful efforts to combat organised crime and corruption.

A journalist with a Belgrade tabloid argued that Serbian mainstream media could be divided into two categories. In one were those who directly work for the benefit of the Serbian government and to promote it. In the other group were those who, reluctantly, are forced through financial pressure, primarily related to advertising, to support the government and refrain from serious criticism.

Similar views were expressed by Ratko Femic, the former editor of the tabloid Kurir, who argued that pro-government media “do not go beyond official statements which mainly suit the leadership of the Interior Ministry”, merely reporting “what is served to them”.

Financial pressure on the media, primarily through payments for advertising space, is another tool through which the ruling parties are able to keep media criticism muted.

Femic provided a very clear example of how critical reporting could result in the immediate loss of advertising revenue, when Kurir decided to run a front page which criticised the decision of the Serbian government to forgive €22 million in debts accrued by Air Serbia, the national airline jointly owned by the Serbian state and Etihad Airways.

“We took an approach - taking from the poor, taking from pensioners and the wages of the poor to give millions to ‘rich Arabs’, something like that. The same day... on that day three major advertisers withdrew their ads,” Femic said.

Another journalist from a Belgrade tabloid also confirmed that advertising contracts dictate which local authorities, companies and individuals cannot be criticised.

A journalist at the daily Politika reported the same kind of pressures, citing a specific article which was withdrawn due to the fact that it criticised one of the newspaper's advertisers. However, the journalist also added that such pressures had not just occurred recently, but under previous governments.

According to Dragoljub Petrovic, editor-in-chief of the critical daily newspaper Danas, its advertising revenue has been reduced to a minimum. Petrovic believes that the reason for this is both government pressure on advertisers and the advertisers' fear of such pressure.

Petrovic recalled that, after social media carried reports that advertising had been withdrawn from Danas during the first half of 2017, a number of companies had wanted to help the paper financially, but without placing advertising in order to avoid drawing government attention to themselves.

Professional Capacities

According to some interviewees, part of the reason why the media narrative remains unchallenged lies in the limited training that many journalists have when it comes to reporting on organised crime and corruption.

Aleksandra Ilic pointed out that many journalists who write about the topic seem to lack a basic understanding of how criminal investigations and trials work, something echoed by some of the judicial officials interviewed as well.

Crucially, whatever the professional shortcomings of many journalists, none of BIRN's interviewees argued that this was the *primary* reason behind the lack of critical reporting on the government's efforts to fight organised crime and corruption in the mainstream media.

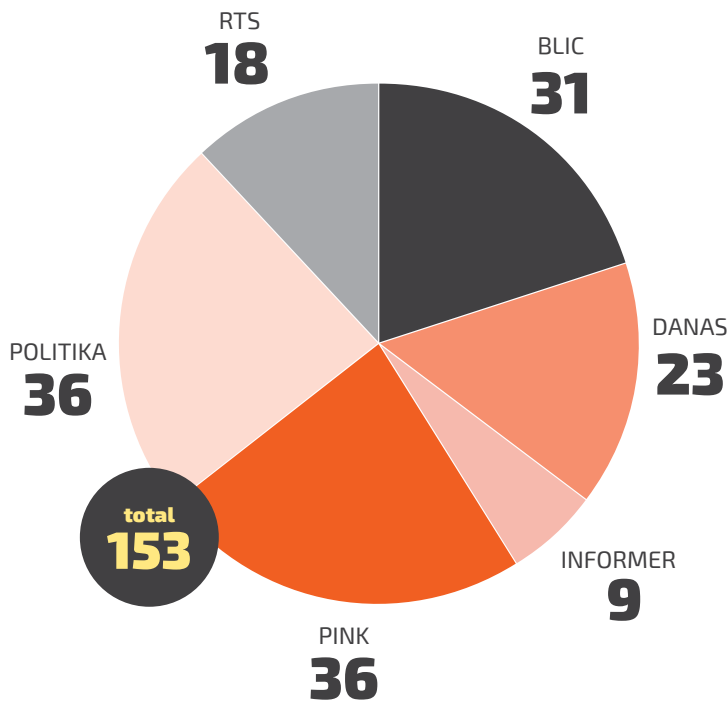
Indeed, former senior police officer Rodoljub Milovic made the argument that, in the same way that there were extremely professional and competent officers in the police, there were also plenty of capable journalists who were held back from reporting professionally in various ways.

ANNEX

**RESULTS OF MEDIA CONTENT
QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS**

How the media agenda is set

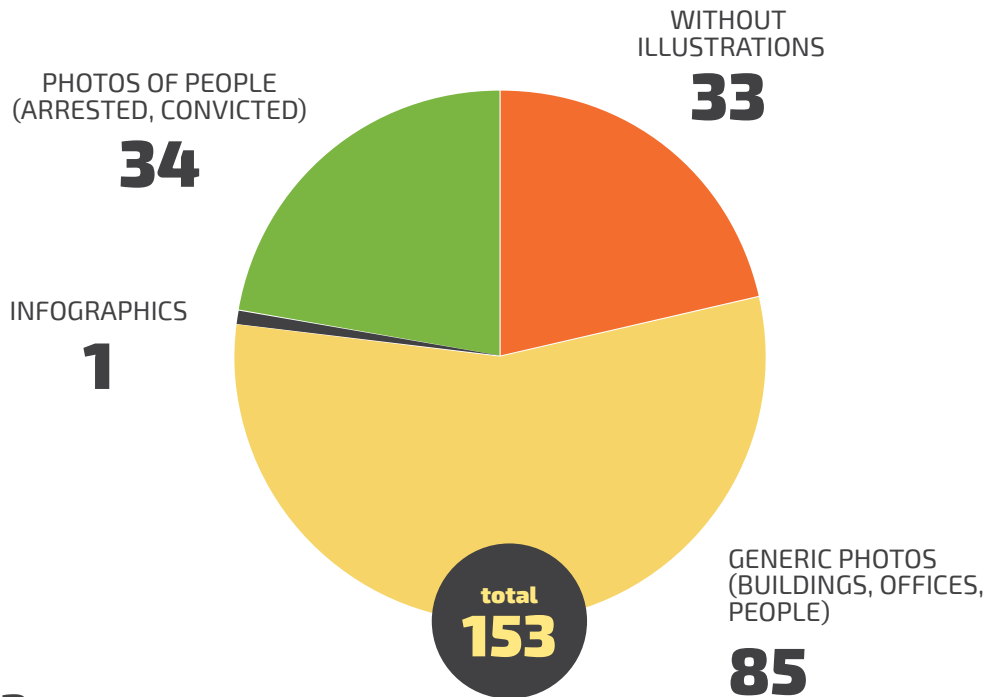
The research was conducted through quantitative and qualitative analysis of media reporting on investigative and court proceedings related to organised crime and corruption. The research sample comprises articles published by daily print media – Politika, Danas, Blic and Informer – and reports broadcast on the main news shows of two TV broadcasters – a commercial television station with a national frequency, TV Pink, and the public broadcaster RTS1. The sample period was the three months starting on April 3, 2017 and ending on June 30, 2017. Over these three months, 153 items were identified and analysed ('items' refers to print or TV reports with their accompanying photos, images, infographics, etc).



Graph 1: Total number of reports per media outlet

Placement of reports

The importance of a topic is reflected in its placement and positioning in the media outlet's overall output. The importance of court proceedings in cases of corruption and organised crime can also be judged by the length of the reports and whether photographs and/or graphics are used.



Graph 2:
Images/illustrations
accompanying reports

Length of the reports

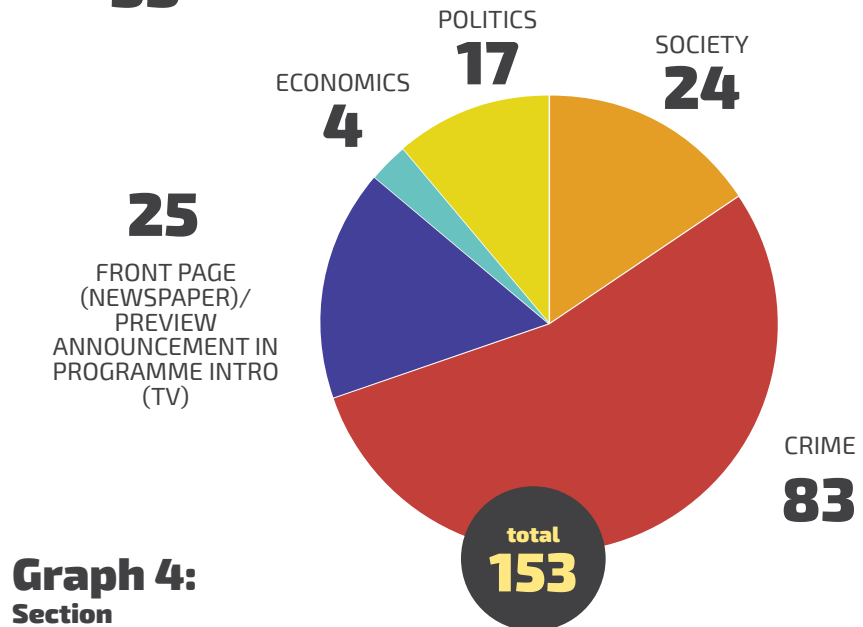
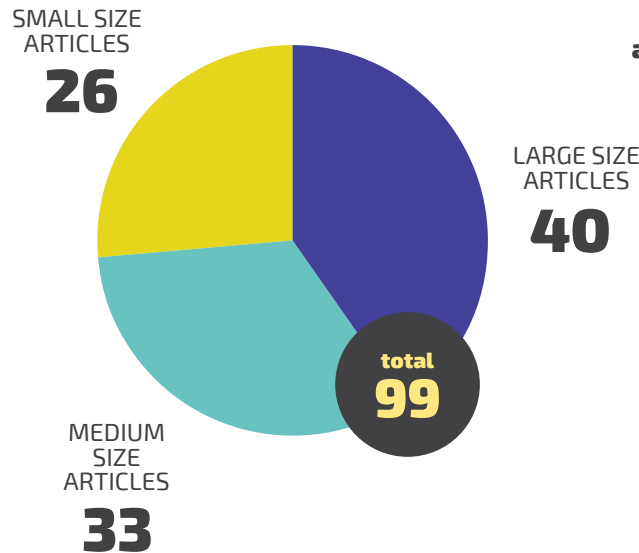
The reports analysed are mostly large articles, up to one newspaper page (40 articles), followed by medium-sized, up to half a page (33 articles), and then small, up to a quarter of a page (26 articles). The TV pieces lasted from six seconds to 3.09 minutes, but the sample contains a significantly larger number of short news reports, with a duration under 60 seconds.

Sectional placing

In the print media, the news items are usually placed in the crime section of a newspaper (83 articles out of the total 153), the society section (24 articles), then the section containing news about politics (17 articles). Twenty-five articles/pieces were trailed on the newspaper's front page or previewed at the start of the news programme, which suggests that these topics were among the most important news items of the day.

TV stations usually placed the topic of organised crime and corruption in the crime section of their broadcasts (40 out of 54 reports) and sometimes in the news programme's headlines (as a preview announcement) (14 out of 54).

Graph 3:
Size of the articles in print media

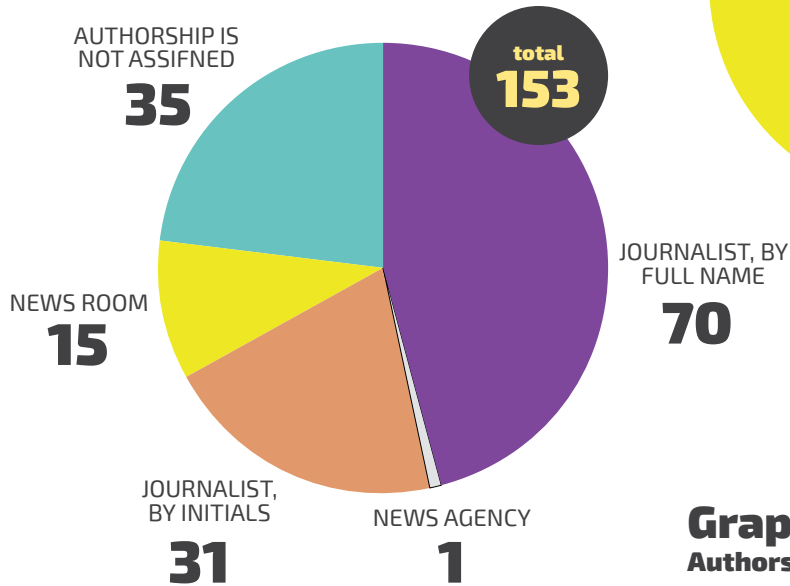


Graph 4:
Section

Authorship

Printing the author’s credit under a report usually implies that the media house stands firmly behind the story, while the absence of a credit indicates the topic is delicate and therefore requires the concealment of the reporter’s identity, or that the information is of lesser importance.

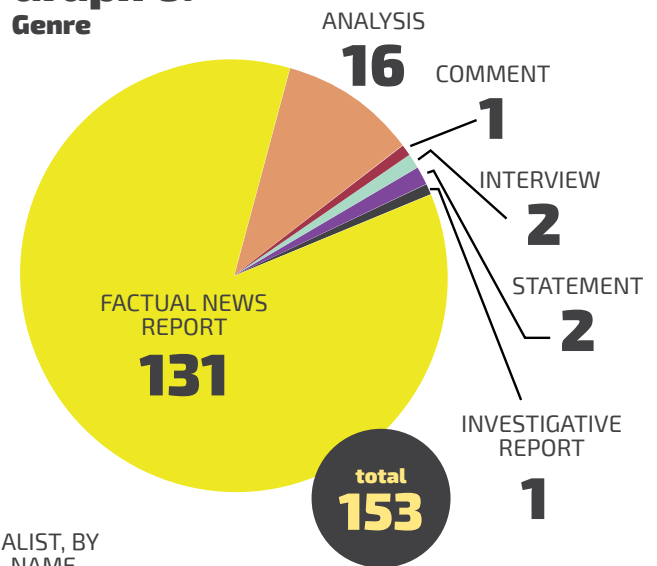
The authors in the daily Politika were largely credited with their full names (21 articles). In Danas, the reporters were identified either by their full names (11 articles) or initials (11 articles). In these two dailies, the authors were not credited under three of the published articles. The authors were largely identified by their full names under articles in Blic (13 articles), while some articles were either credited with initials or to ‘editorial staff’ (seven times each). In the newspaper Informer, none of the authors were credited by their full names; in six cases they were credited with initials, and ‘editorial staff’ were credited in three articles.



Genre

An analysis of the type of articles published on the subject illustrates the dominance of factual news reporting. As many as three-quarters of the articles/TV pieces analysed belong to this genre. Only 10 per cent of the reports were analytical.

Graph 6:
Genre



Graph 5:
Authorship

Topics

Abuses of office and public funds were the issues that were most covered. This was followed by articles/pieces which covered court proceedings related to organised crime (56 reports). A smaller number of reports analysed systemic problems in the judicial system, i.e. spoke about the quality of the policies in this area.

Out of 20 news items about the giving and accepting of bribes and 18 about the abuse of public funds, the selected media wrote seven times about the arrest of the Acting Director of Resavica, Stevan Dzelatovic.

Other important news items related to corruption were news of the arrest of local officials from the City Administration of Valjevo (five reports) and news related to a controversial Romanian 'tycoon', Sebastijan Gica.

As regards the embezzlement and abuse of public funds, a large amount of media attention was directed towards Operation Signal, which involved the embezzlement of public funds by 74 local officials. There were eight news reports about their arrests and the developments that followed.

An investigation by the Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime into the buying of shares in the company Energoprojekt and the pressing of charges against Dobrosav Bojovic, owner of the company Napred, was covered twice, both times

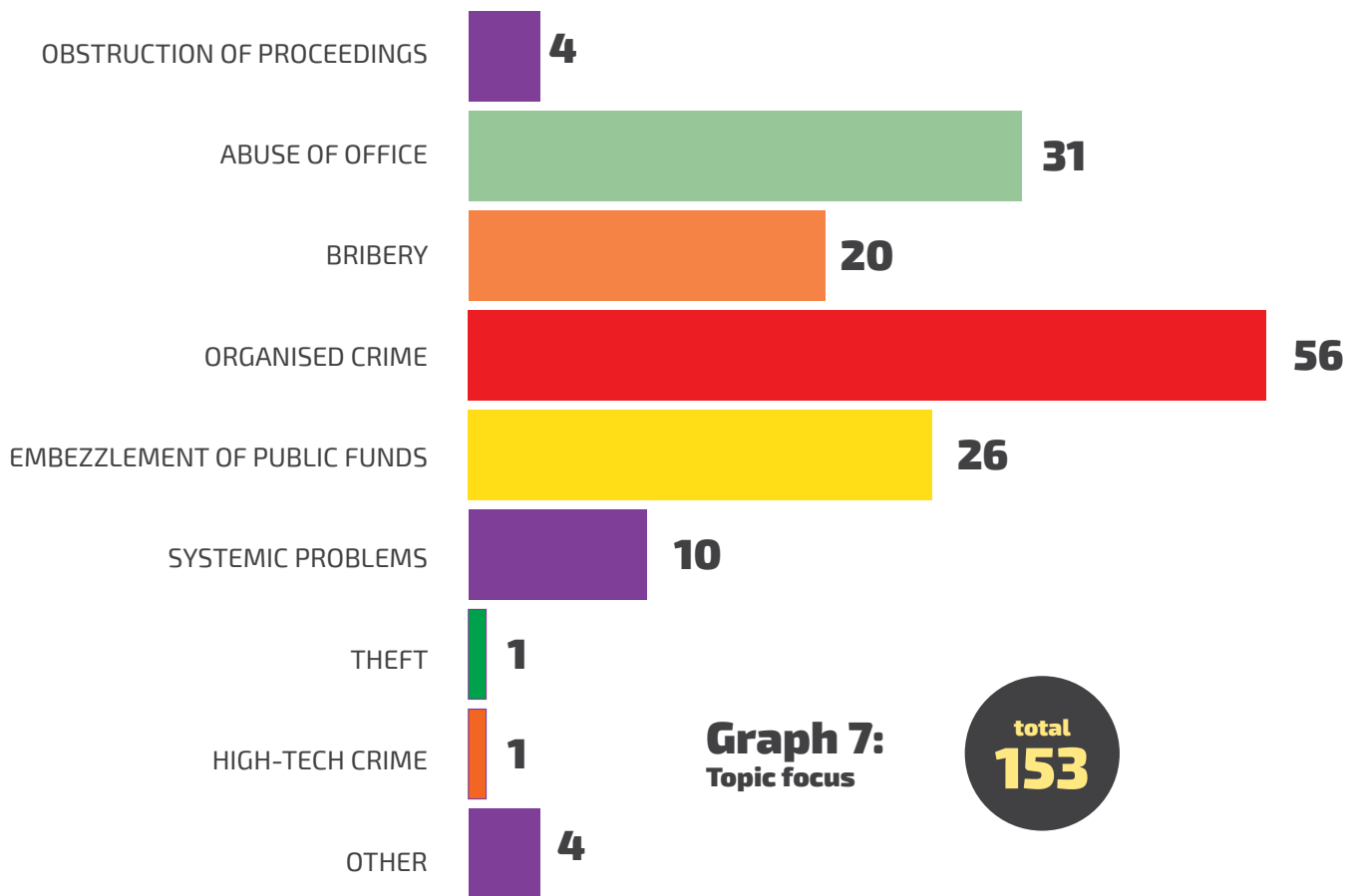
in the daily Blic, which featured the story on its front page and in large-sized articles.

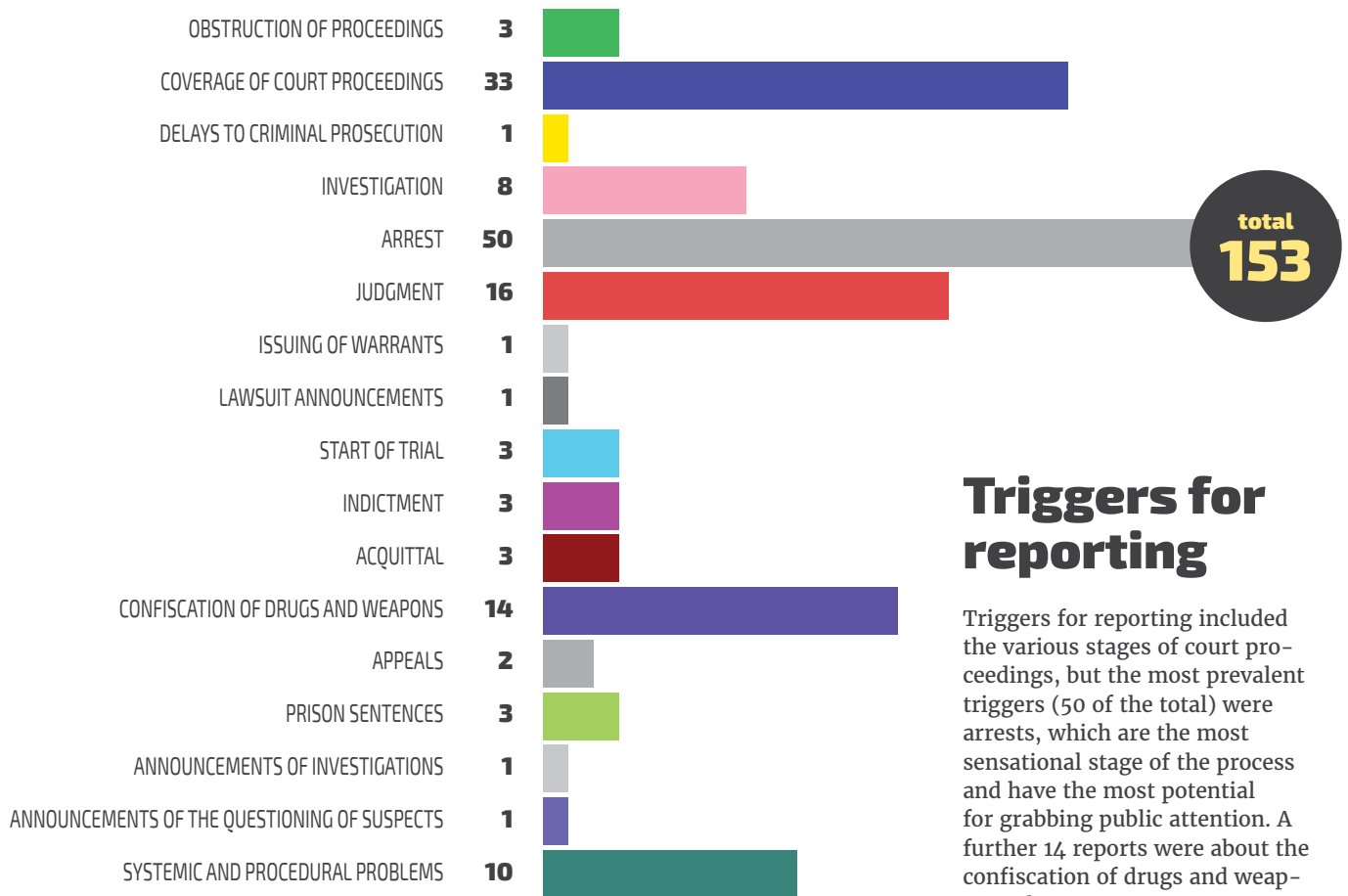
Two reports, in Blic and Politika, were about the start of the trial for abuses at the company Kolubara. In the sample, there were also one-off news pieces about investigations into embezzlement at the Foundation of Dragica Nikolic, about abuses of public funds by a customs officer (Politika) and by a driver at the Lasta transport company (Blic).

Articles that analysed systemic problems in the judicial system (10) were mostly published by Danas (five) and Politika (three). TV stations did not cover this topic in their main news shows, which rarely feature analysis pieces.

Politika wrote extensive articles about the shortage of courtrooms, which is slowing down court operations, and about the lack of judges, and also examined the terminology used in court.

The daily Danas covered topics such as the government ignoring a report by the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and the Ombudsman about the need for Serbia to reform the justice system, and published an article about a non-paper report by the European Commission about Serbia's progress in the Judicial System and Fundamental Rights and Justice, Freedom and Security chapters in the EU acquis.





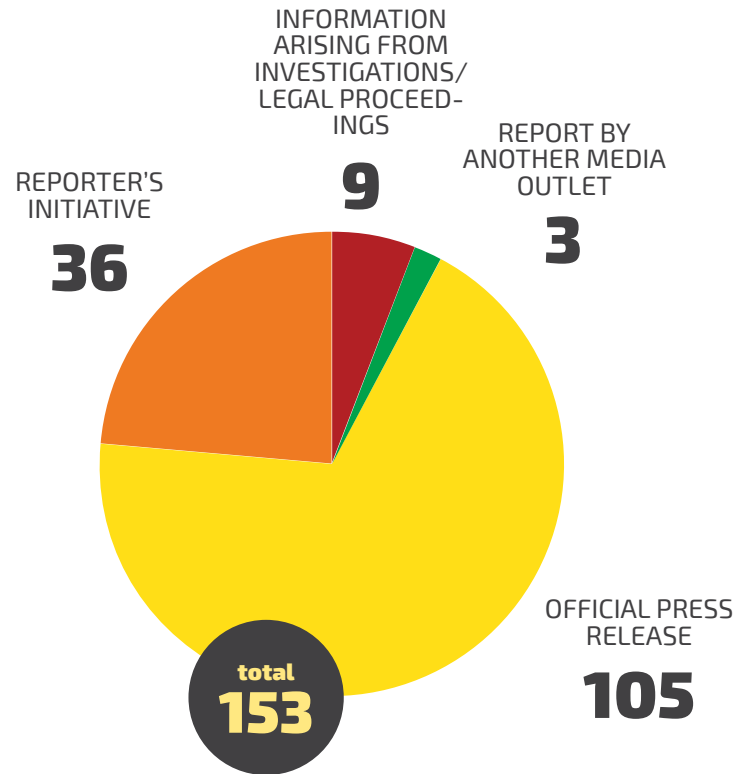
Triggers for reporting

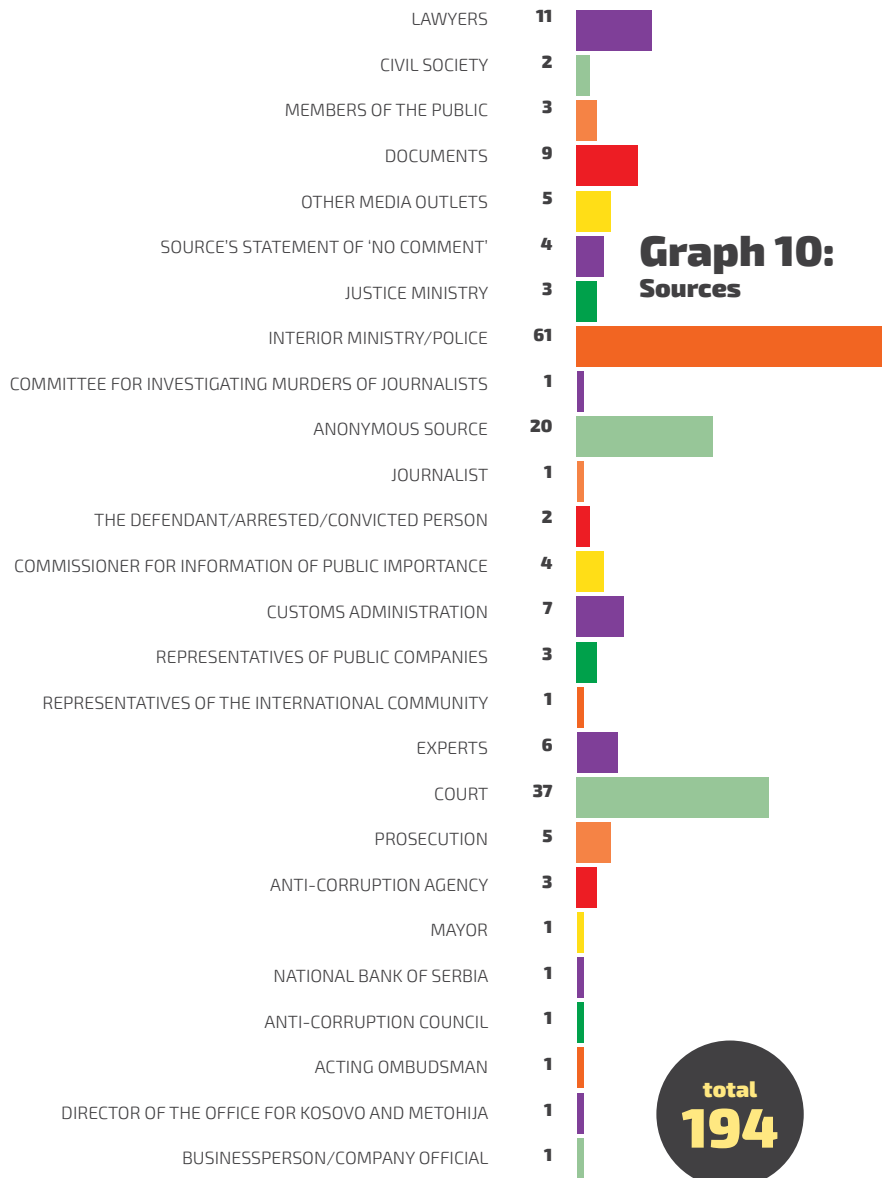
Triggers for reporting included the various stages of court proceedings, but the most prevalent triggers (50 of the total) were arrests, which are the most sensational stage of the process and have the most potential for grabbing public attention. A further 14 reports were about the confiscation of drugs and weapons. There were 33 reports on court proceedings and 16 about judgments.

In most cases, the reporting and publishing of articles/pieces was triggered by official press releases.

Graph 8:
Triggers for reporting

Graph 9:
Report drivers





**Total number of sources is larger than total number of news items as some items quoted more than one source*

Sources

The police are the source in 61 reports, which include press releases from the Interior Ministry, the police's Internal Affairs Sector of Police or statements by the Interior Minister himself. Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic was identified 12 times as the source of information and was the most cited individual source.

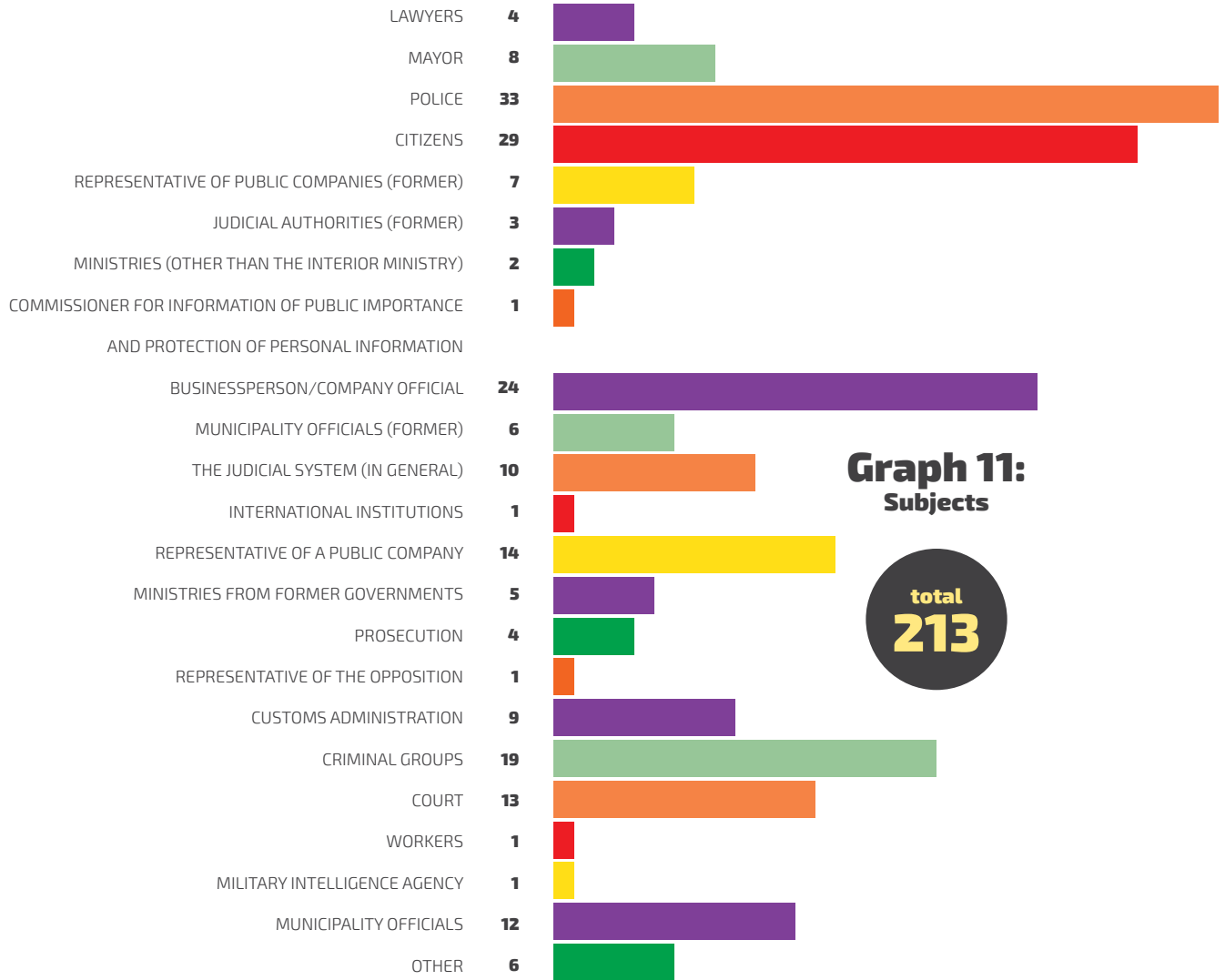
Other sources include representatives of courts and the prosecution, while in 12 reports totally 20 source were anonymous. Anonymous sources from the police or prosecution are predominantly used in reports by tabloids Blic and Informer. Examples of the crediting of these sources include: "a Blic interviewee familiar with the investigation", "a source close to the investigation", "our paper's well-informed source", "a source from the Valjevo court", "our source close to the police investigation", "one of the eyewitnesses", and "a source from the special prosecutor's office".

Subjects of reporting

Apart from sources, the analysis of content also included the subjects of the reporting, i.e. the people who attracted the attention of the media because they are the subject of court proceedings or a police investigation. In the total sample, 213 subjects were identified. A large number were business-people/company officials (24) as well as current and former public company owners and directors (21) or lawyers (four). Municipality officials were mentioned in the context of abuses of office.

There were also significant numbers of law enforcement officials (33), members of the public/citizens (29), municipality officials (12) and judicial officials – judges and prosecutors (17). Members of the former executive government appear five times in the sample. Members of the Customs Administration's Department for the Prevention of Smuggling of appear 9 times. Businessman Marko Miskovic, owner of the company Mera Invest, son of the owner of Delta Holding, appeared as a subjects three times, Dobrosav Bojovic, owner of Napred, appeared twice, as did businessman Zeljko Rutovic. Businessman Sebastijan Gica, a former Romanian MP, was the subject of reports 10 times.

The sample contains seven appearances by former representatives of public companies – the former manager of Rad, Miljko Zivojinovic (two appearances), and the former deputy to the general manager of the company Komel, Ljubisa Mitic (twice) in the context of embezzling public funds, the former director of Kolubara, Dragan Tomic, in the context of the abuse of public funds, and the former chief of the department for pediatric oncology of the Institute for Oncology and Radiology at the Clinical Centre of Serbia, Zoran Bekic, in the context of abuse of office.

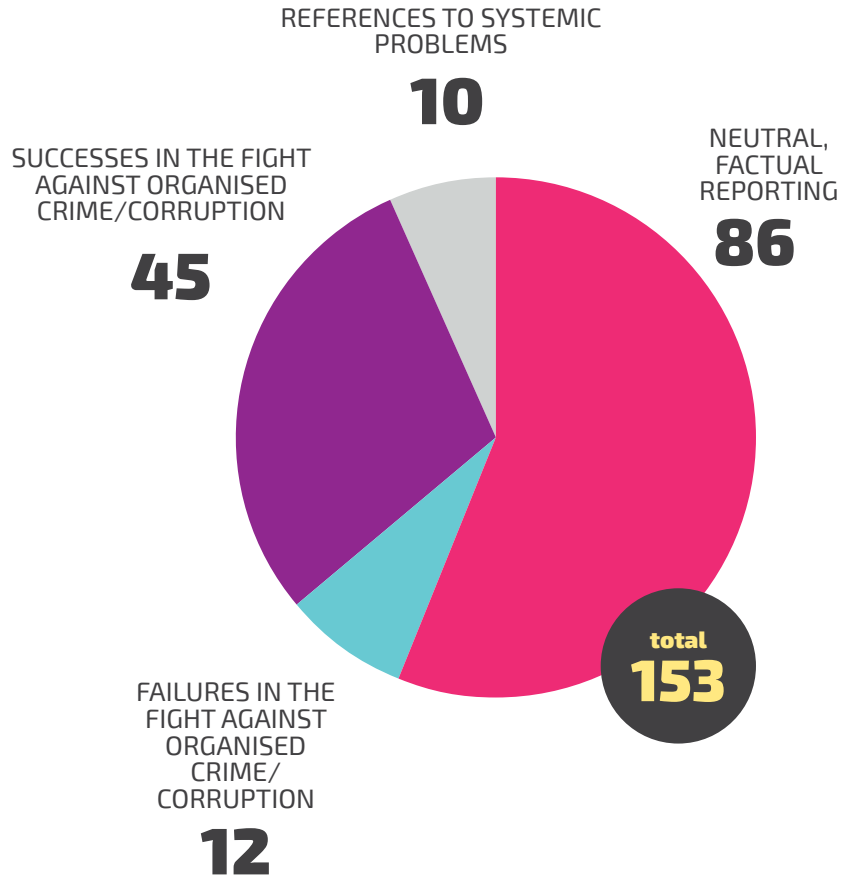


**Total number of subjects is larger than total number of news items as some items referred to more than one subject*

Tone of reporting

The sample was dominated by neutral, factual reporting, although 45 media reports had a positive, promotional tone, emphasising successes in fighting organised crime and corruption.

There were 12 reports with a negative tone, and 10 more emphasising systemic problems related to court proceedings.



Graph 12:
Tone of reporting

About the project:

The report was published as part of a project entitled 'Exercising Freedom of Expression and the Openness of State Institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia'. The project was implemented by the Balkan Investigative Regional Reporting Network – BIRN Hub, in partnership with BIRN Serbia and BIRN Kosovo, from April 2017 to January 2018, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia. It was supported by German Federal Foreign Office Stability Pact funds.

Credits:

Country analyst:

Milos Damnjanovic

Researcher:

Jelena Veljkovic

Media monitoring:

Tanja Maksic (team leader), Stefani Sovanec

Project coordinator:

Marina Radenkovic

Country coordinator:

Kalina Simic

English-language editor:

Matthew Collin

Special thanks to:

Larisa Rankovic and Marija Ristic

Web design and development:

Milomir Orlovic, Branko Karapandza