

# The Role and Possibilities of the Serbian Media in Kosovo

2022





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## About Open Initiative

"Democracy, Openness and Perspectives of the Serbian Community in Kosovo – Open" is an initiative of Kosovo Foundation for Open Society (KFOS) launched during 2020. The aim of this initiative is to develop an open and dynamic space for discussion within and among the Serbian and other communities, as well as with institutions in Kosovo.

Civil society organizations and media from Serb community in Kosovo, members of the initiative, specifically deal with analyses and assessments of impact of civic and political organizations on the development of democracy as well as openness of Serb community in Kosovo. These analyses assess the openness of institutions, public policies, and important processes towards Serb community in Kosovo, as well as the level of openness of Serb community towards them.

These analyses will help provide insights into the situation and perspectives of Serb community in Kosovo, serving at the same time for informed representation in front of decision-makers, local and central institutions, and the international community

# Introduction

## About the study

The study follows the trends in the work of media reporting in the Serbian language in Kosovo: how free they are to perform their job, whether they are open to different opinions and topics, and how well they respond to the needs of citizens in their work, whether they face censorship and self-censorship, and attacks and pressures. The first part of the study describes the situation in the media, based on this year's research as

well as on research conducted by CBS as part of the OPEN initiative in 2020-2021 in partnership with the Media Center from Čaglavica. The second part of the study refers to the quantitative findings of the research conducted as part of the OPEN initiative. Finally, the third part presents the qualitative results obtained through in-depth interviews with journalists reporting in the Serbian language in Kosovo. Finally, at the end of the analysis, there are recommendations related to the media and institutions.



# 01. Executive Summary

Media reporting in the Serbian language in Kosovo faces numerous problems and obstacles in performing their duty to fairly and objectively inform citizens. Furthermore, the role of the media is to encourage pluralism of opinion among citizens, to ensure the comprehensiveness of information that is important for the harmonious functioning of society, depending on the topics they selected in their statute.

Through this research, we wanted to find out how well the media are able to fulfill their role. We conducted a field survey that included respondents from the north and south of Kosovo. In addition, we conducted in-depth interviews with journalists from Serbian communities in Kosovo.

Research has shown that the media, respectively journalists, as representatives of the media, understand the citizens' needs for information but cannot adequately respond to them for several reasons. Some of the reasons are as follows:

- ⊖ Difficult communication with institutions
- ⊖ Censorship and Self-censorship
- ⊖ Lack Of Capacities
- ⊖ Financing

On the other hand, the surveyed citizens believe that journalists often do not deal with important topics, so 54% of respondents think essential news is often missing. In comparison, 55% of respondents believe that journalists are afraid to tell the truth, due to the various pressures they are exposed to.

The journalists we interviewed see it differently. They point out that the lack of capacity and personnel is the main reason they do not engage in investigative work to a greater extent.

However, they agree that there is censorship, especially among media financed from state funds, and self-censorship, which is more prevalent and is present throughout all media in Kosovo.

## Key recommendations

- ⊖ TO REPORT ON LOCAL TOPICS
- ⊖ TO EXPLORE AUDIENCE NEEDS
- ⊖ TO REPORT PRESSURE AND ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS
- ⊖ TO ANSWER TO JOURNALISTS' INQUIRIES
- ⊖ TO RESPOND TO REPORTED CASES OF PRESSURE AND ATTACKS
- ⊖ TO ENSURE SUSTAINABLE FUNDS FOR FINANCING THE WORK OF MINORITY MEDIA
- ⊖ TO ADJUST THE FUNDS TO THE NEEDS OF THE MEDIA

## 02. Area X

### 2.1 State of Affairs and Problem Identification

#### ⊖ What is the situation in your line of work?

The media in Kosovo face numerous problems in their work, as indicated by multiple reports related to this field. For example, the lack of implementation of legal guarantees for media workers and institutional protection of journalists, non-compliance with the law on access to information, the refusal of institutions and their representatives to answer journalists' questions, limited financial resources, and, subsequently, the lack of capacity to perform journalistic work - these are just some of the problems faced by the journalists in Kosovo. In addition to the above, the media reporting in the Serbian language also faces the problem of non-compliance with the law on official languages. Hence, it often happens that when they receive a response from the institutions, it is in Albanian and not in the Serbian language, which is also the official language of Kosovo. Furthermore, in interviews with CBS researchers, the journalists stated that Serbian-language media face pressure in their work, censorship, and self-censorship.

A total of 48 media are active in the Serbian language, of which 8 are television, 21 radio stations and 13 online portals, and 6 video productions. Part of the media cooperates through 3 networks, the Kosma network, the Most network, and the Independent TV network.

**48** media are active in the Serbian language



**8** television



**21** radio stations



**13** online portals



**6** video productions

Research conducted by Crno Beli Svet and the Media Center from Čaglavica during 2020-2021 as part of the OPEN initiative showed that there are several sources of information in the areas in Kosovo where Serbs live. Citizens have access to media content from media from Kosovo reporting in the Serbian language, Albanian media from Kosovo, as well as media from Serbia. In such a situation, Serbian media from Kosovo are not in an equal position in terms of production capacity, both in the type and quantity of content they produce daily.

Media in Kosovo reporting in Serbian are registered in the most significant number of cases with the Independent Media Commission according to Law no. 04/L-44 on the Independent Media Commission and can be divided into:

- Media founded by the state (public enterprises or public broadcasters)
- Commercial media (established as an entrepreneurial initiative of their owners)
- Media that function as registered non-governmental organizations
- Correspondents or correspondents' offices of media or agencies with head office in Belgrade or abroad
- Local audio-video productions that broadcast their own produced program through partner media and the Internet.

Central Kosovo and the north of Kosovo are best covered by media coverage, and Metohija/ Dukagjin, Gora (where Gorans and Bosnians who speak Serbian and Bosnian language live), and the municipality of Zubin Potok in the north of Kosovo are the worst. The work of the media in the field can be evaluated the same. Reports mainly cover central and northern Kosovo, as well as from Pomoravlje/Anamorava, and the least from Sirinička Župa/Zhupa, Metohija/Dukagjin, Gora, and Zubin Potok municipality.

According to financing methods, Serbian media are divided into those financed by:

- Planned financial allocations from the budget of Serbia (SOE Mreža Most)
- Funds awarded by the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia based on the competition for co-financing of electronic media
- Funds awarded based on the competition by the Office for Community Affairs at the Cabinet of the Prime Minister of Kosovo
- Planned financial allocations from the budget of the Assembly of Kosovo (RTK2)
- Donations from international organizations and foreign embassies based on projects (the biggest donors for media in Serbian so far have been: OSCE, UNDP, USAID, NED,

BTD, KFOS, and embassies of Norway, USA, Germany, UK, etc.)

- Sponsorships (minimal and minor)
- Advertising revenue (minimal and minor)

#### **a. What changes are happening, what are the trends**

This year's research shows that the media have increasingly evident problems when trying to get information and interlocutors, both in institutions and among citizens. Some research participants point out that there are media that are "blacklisted" by Serbian officials in Kosovo and that, apart from not responding to their inquiries, they are not invited to official media conferences.

Interviewed journalists point out that independent media are in an increasingly difficult position due to unstable funding and the lack of access to information and officials. Being tied to donors and project funding also makes it difficult for them to work because there is no long-term and stable funding. On the other hand, they have to coordinate their project proposals with the goals of the donors. Hence, they are often forced to perform other tasks, such as organizing round tables, focus groups, and surveys, which leaves them less time for journalistic work. At the same time, work on projects also requires an administrative part of the work that journalists are forced to do because they are small newsrooms. This makes it difficult for them to devote more time to more complex topics. As a result, their reporting is often reduced to conveying statements and announcements.

**b. Who are the crucial stakeholders, and what are their roles**

The Independent Media Commission (IMC) plays the most significant role in ensuring pluralism in reporting. IMC is the main independent regulatory body that “licenses public and private broadcasters, establishes and implements policy and regulates broadcasting rights, obligations, and responsibilities of individuals and entities who provide audio and audiovisual media services.” Criticism of the work of this body refers to the simplicity of the procedure and minimal requirements for media registration, the selection of members of the BD by the Assembly of Kosovo, as well as delays in initiating cases, and imposing fines for violations of the law. Radio and television stations are under the jurisdiction of this body. The Press Council is responsible for compliance with the press code and journalistic standards in print media and on internet portals. The law also regulates the existence of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) or RTK as a public broadcaster.

**c. What are the main problems?**

Research *Openness of Serbian media in Kosovo*<sup>1</sup> from 2021 showed the presence of a marked polarization among the Serbian media in Kosovo, which closely follows the abovementioned division in funding sources.

Also, the main problems of the Serbian media in Kosovo are related to budget funds. Funding is stated as a critical element that affects all segments of the media’s work, starting with selecting topics, moving on to sources of information, and the availability of crucial political actors important for reporting.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Openness of Serbian media in Kosovo, OPEN 2021, <https://kfos.org/al/publikime/99/otvorenost-srpskih-medija-na-kosovu>

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Interviewed journalists point out that independent media are in an increasingly difficult position due to unstable funding and the lack of access to information and officials. Being tied to donors and project funding also makes it difficult for them to work because there is no long-term and stable funding. On the other hand, they have to coordinate their project proposals with the goals of the donors. Hence, they are often forced to perform other tasks, such as organizing round tables, focus groups, and surveys, which leaves them less time for journalistic work.

Another troubling trend in the media domain is the dominance of politics. Political topics dominate in all spheres of citizens’ lives, which is also reflected in the work of the media, which has little space for reporting on other issues.

The third problem relates to the safety of journalists. Journalists face threats and pressures, while there is a lack of institutional protection and timely resolution of cases of attacks on journalists.

## 2.2 The Purpose of the study and the research methodology

The purpose of the study is to contribute to the development of pluralism in Serbian communities in Kosovo through the analysis of media freedoms in the Serbian language in Kosovo and the analysis of the influence of the media on creating public opinion and enabling the freedom of informed citizen choices.

We will try to find out how existing trends influence the openness of the media to respond to the media needs of citizens and ensure the representation of the pluralism of citizens' opinions in the public domain.

The questions we will try to answer with this research are the following:

- ① To what extent do the media understand citizens' needs for information, and do they adequately respond to them?
- ② Does the lack of security of journalists from Serbian media in Kosovo prevent journalists from dealing with specific topics and problems?
- ③ To what extent do institutions and political parties provide the necessary/requested data to the media?

#### Goals of the study:

- 1 Investigate whether and to what extent there is self-censorship in the Serbian media in Kosovo through interviews with journalists
- 2 Influence the pluralism of opinion through texts and different forms of informing citizens through different authors' texts, positions, and opinions.
- 3 Assessment of the ability of the media to inform citizens in such a way that they have the opportunity to make informed decisions about important aspects of life considering the specifics of the environment in which they work
- 4 Contribute to a better understanding of citizens' needs for information and their expectations from the media

We conducted a quantitative and qualitative survey to achieve the study's goals.

A field survey was conducted in the south and north of Kosovo as part of the quantitative re-



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search. A total of 600 respondents participated, 300 in the north, in the municipalities of Severna Mitrovica, Leposavić, Zvečan and Zubin Potok, and 300 in the south (from the region of Gračanica, Kosovsko Pomoravlje/Anamorava, Štrpce and Goraždevac).

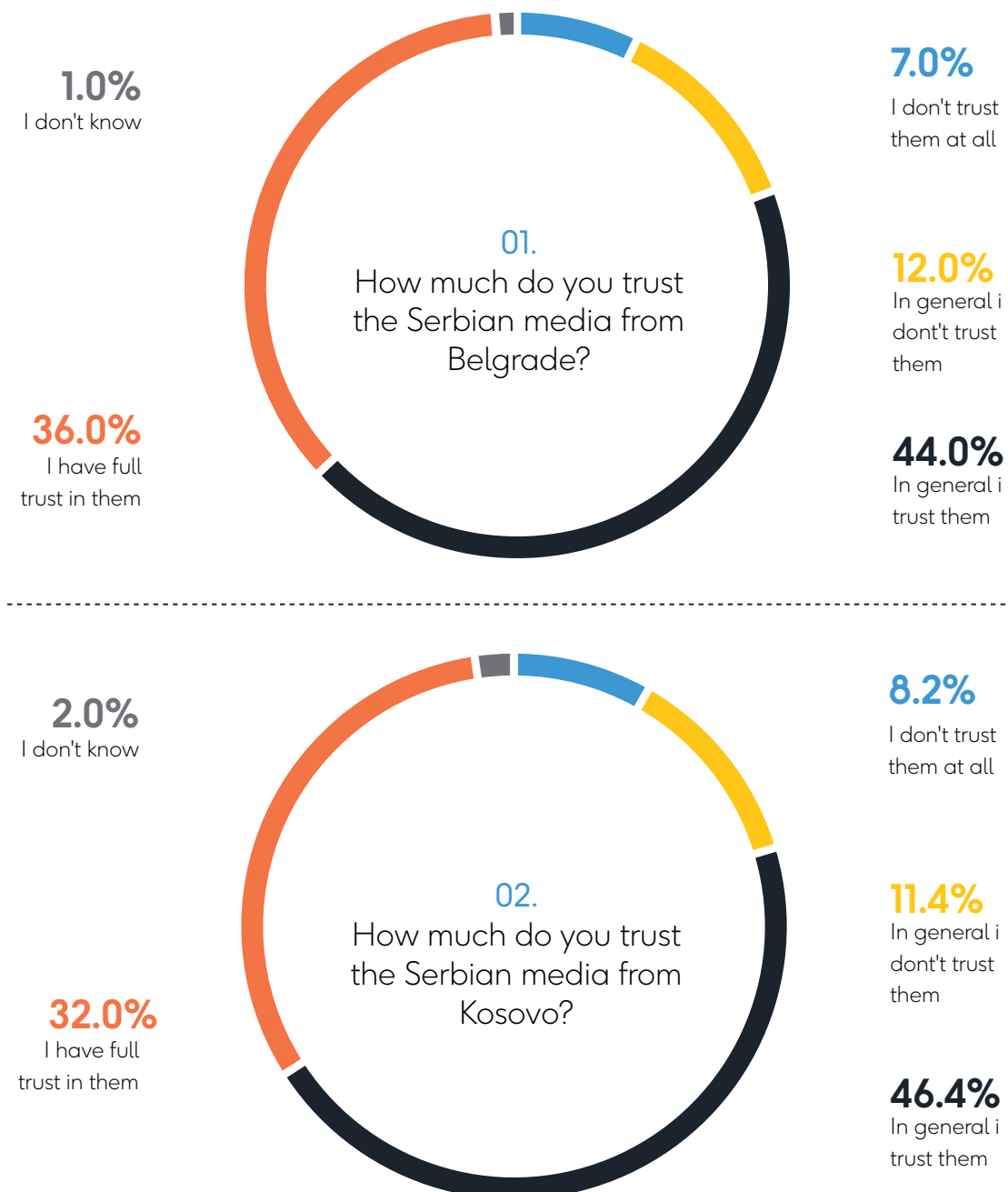
As part of the qualitative research, five in-depth interviews were conducted with journalists from the north and south of Kosovo. In conversations with them, we tried to find out how they choose topics and, whether they face pressure to work or not work on specific topics; whether Serbian-language media in Kosovo contribute to the pluralism of citizens' opinions through the topics covered by them; whether there is censorship and self-censorship and what is the situation regarding the access to information from central and local institutions.

## 2.3 Research results and contextualization

### Quantitative Research

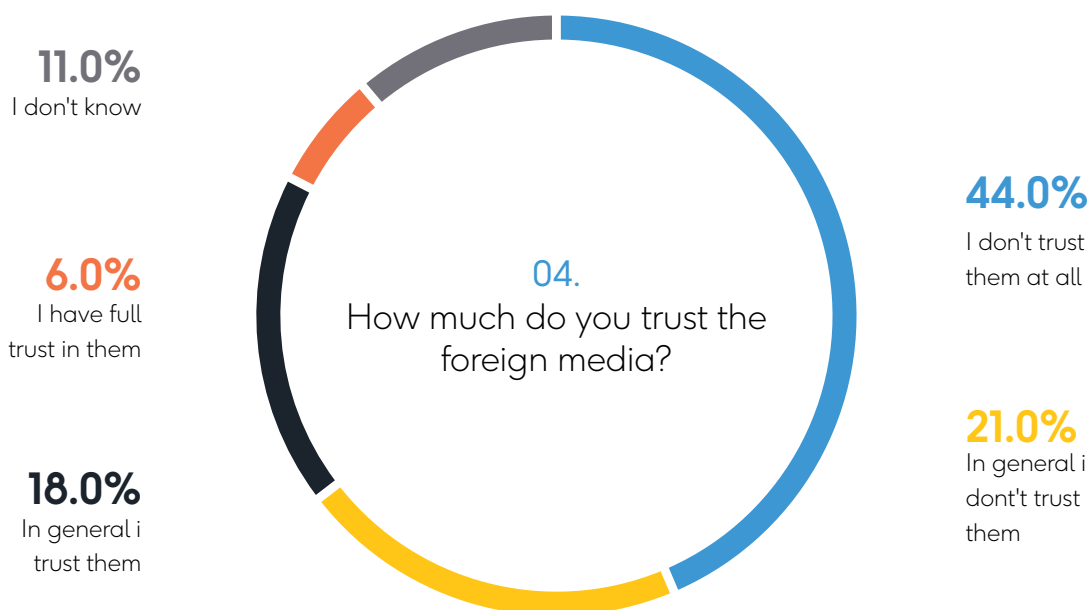
Through field surveys, citizens of Serbian nationality answered questions about how they see the media in their environment and whether the media adequately respond to their needs.

First, we asked citizens how much trust they have in the media belonging to different language groups and regions. According to the results, citizens have the most trust in the Serbian media from Belgrade and Kosovo (around 80% of respondents stated that they completely or mostly trust these media).



However, the situation is entirely opposite regarding trust in Albanian media from Kosovo and foreign media. As many as 81% of respondents answered that they do not trust the Albanian media from Kosovo at all or, in general, do not trust them. Also, 12% said they trust these media, and 7% did not know or did not want to answer.

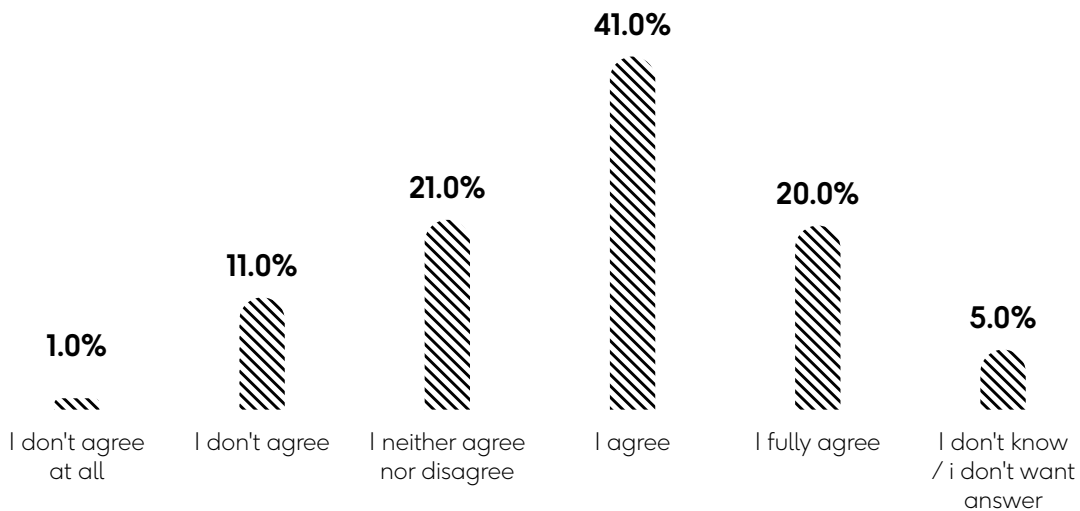
When it comes to foreign media, citizens' trust is slightly higher than in Albanian media but significantly less than the trust in Serbian media. For example, 24% of respondents from Kosovo trust these media, while trust is mostly or completely absent with 65% of respondents.



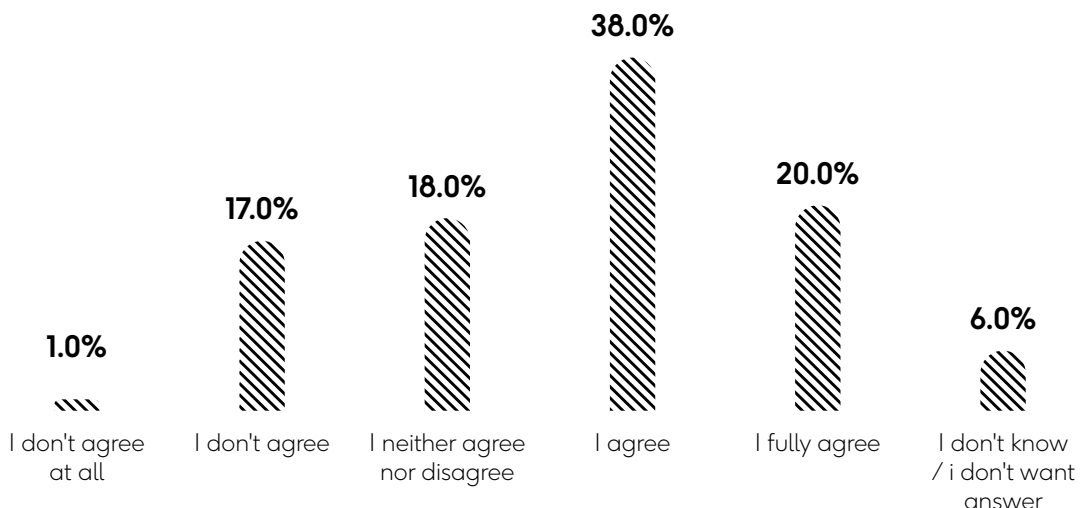
One of the reasons for distrust in the media by a certain percentage of citizens may come from the belief that the media is under the control of the government and political parties. Although 61% of respondents agree with this statement, 12% believe that the media is not under the control of the government and political parties. In comparison, 26% of respondents did not know how to answer or were undecided on this issue.

Most respondents (58%) also believe that the media is biased and favors a particular side, and 17% think the opposite. However, it is interesting to note that 40% of respondents stated that the media try to process the story critically and from several angles (graph 7).

### 05. The media are under the control of the political parties and the government.

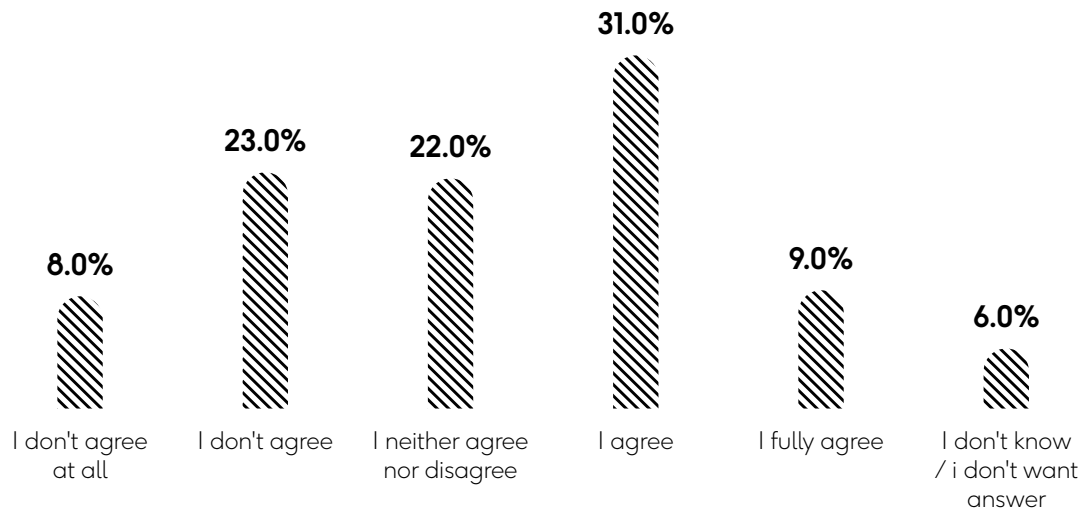


### 06. I consider that the information i receive from the media is biased, and favors a certain party





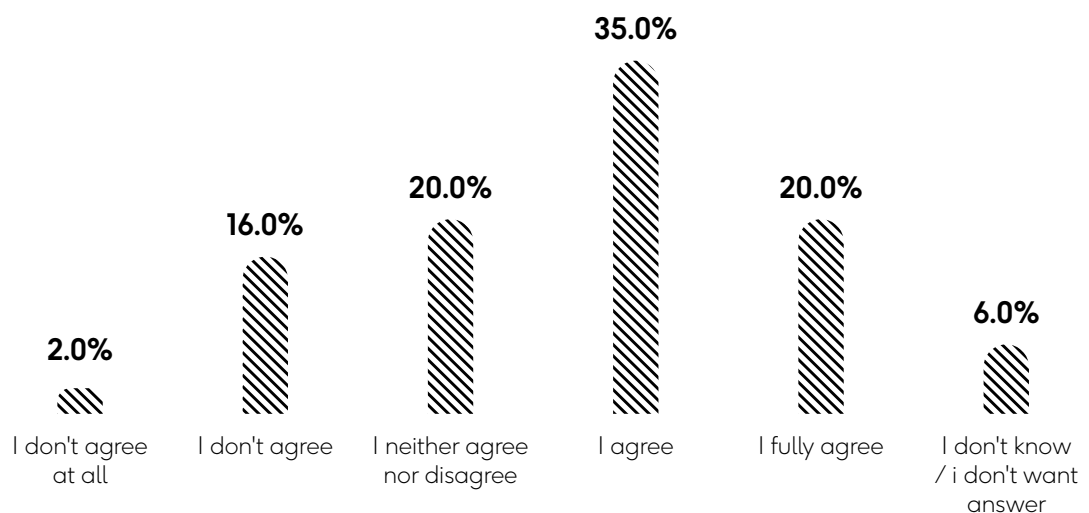
### 07. When reporting on an event, the media try to process the story critically and from several angles



Based on the citizens' responses, we can conclude that although most think that the media is biased, they still believe that the media tries to critically process the story from different angles. We may find the cause of this contradiction in

the answers to the following questions. Namely, 55% of respondents think that journalists are afraid to tell the truth due to the various pressures they are exposed to, while 18% of respondents believe this is not true.

### 08. I think that journalists are afraid to write/tell the truth because of the various pressures they are exposed to

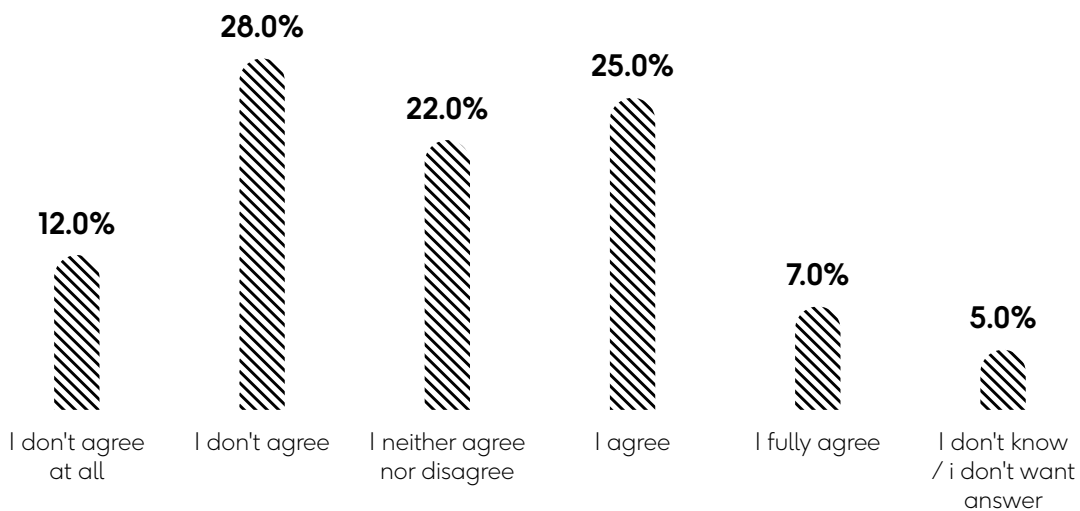


Furthermore, 40% of the respondents believe that the media are not independent and that they do not make their own decisions about how to report. In comparison, 32% of the respondents do not agree with this statement. Respectively, they believe that the media are independent. Interestingly, an average of 20% of respondents answered questions about media independence with "neither agree nor disagree."

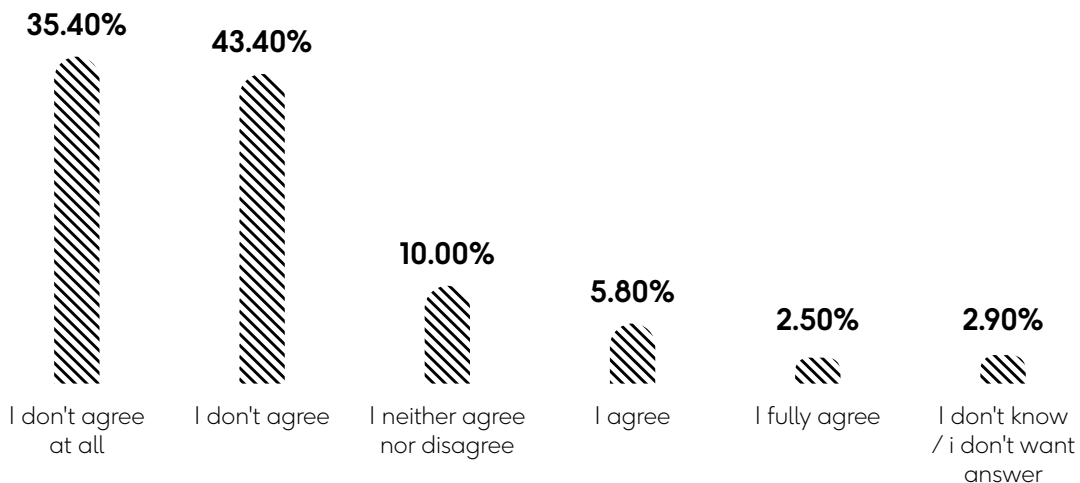
"This is a relatively high percentage of those indifferent to claims that require a critical approach and awareness of the work of the media in their environment.

50% of respondents believe there is a difference in reporting and professional work between different media in Kosovo, and 19% believe this is not true.

### 09. I believe that the media are independent and make their own decisions on how to report



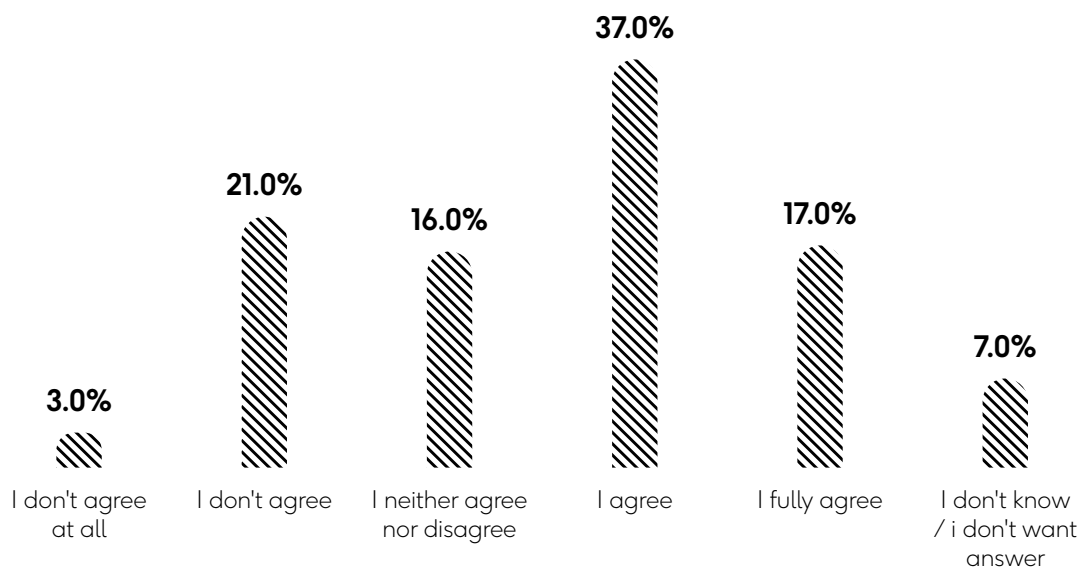
### 10. There is a difference in reporting and professional work among the media in Kosovo



Regarding the representation of topics in the media, i.e., topics that interest citizens, 54% of

respondents believe important news is often missing, while 24% believe the opposite.

## 11. I often notice that certain news are not present in the media



Multiple answers were allowed for the question, "name 3-5 topics that the Serbian media in Kosovo should cover more often". Therefore, we have represented numerous topics that citizens recognized as important and insufficiently represented in the media domain. The topics that received the most nominations are culture/art, followed by the economy, sports, education,

security, and unemployment, i.e., employment, by this order. These topics received over 100 votes from citizens. Other nominated topics were tourism, entertainment, ecology, violence against women, health care, and others. You can find the detailed overview with the numbers of votes in the chart below.



The most interesting finding is that the most significant number of answers was "I don't know." We can interpret it in several ways:

- ⊖ citizens are passive and uninterested
- ⊖ there is a lack of pluralism of opinion among citizens
- ⊖ citizens do not see the real possibility of influencing the topics covered by the media.

Of course, the reasons are different, and stated assumptions do not necessarily reflect the factual situation. However, it is a fact that most citizens do not know how to list the topics they would like to read or hear about in the media, which is undoubtedly worrying and signals the citizens' indifference to the work of the media.

## Qualitative Research

For the purposes of qualitative research, we conducted 5 interviews with Serbian journalists from Kosovo. We tried to find out how well the media meets the needs of citizens in terms of the representation of topics that are important to citizens, in terms of objectivity, and in terms of the media's ability to inform citizens in such a way that they have the opportunity to make informed decisions about important aspects of life.

All the interviewed journalists pointed out that informative topics concerning politics and even high politics prevail more in the media than local topics. However, they also point out that there is a lack of in-depth research work because, as they say, the local media lacks the capacity for that.

The main obstacles faced by the media in Kosovo in their work are:

- ⊖ Lack of communication with institutions - local and central
- ⊖ Censorship and self-censorship
- ⊖ Lack of Capacities
- ⊖ Financing



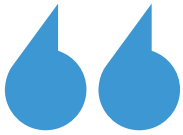
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### Difficult communication with institutions

The lack of communication with institutions and, therefore, difficulties in obtaining information of public importance is underlined as one of the biggest obstacles in the work of the media and the implementation of their duty to encourage pluralism of opinion among citizens and provide answers to the media needs of citizens.

"The people who work in those institutions do not understand that it is their job to provide information to us. They rather perceive the media either as an enemy or as an opposition entity that does everything in their power to oppose them and to convey to the public what they are doing badly... Instead of seeing the media as a kind of support to improve their work and to promote what they do," says one journalist from the north of Kosovo.

The lack of communication is present both among representatives of institutions at the local level and those at the central level, including the Office of the Prime Minister, ministries, and the Kosovo government. As one journalist states: "The worst situation is with the representatives of the Serbian List," who rarely respond to journalists' inquiries. Another journalist points out that the Serbian List rarely answers journalists' questions. When it happens, it happens in writing "as if they are afraid of the possibility of being asked another question."



Those pressures obviously exist; I faced one of those...I think that some media and journalists already know what they should report and that they cannot write about it due to some political structures. There is already a pattern about what can and cannot be written. I think it exists in certain media.”

Journalists further state that the situation is even worse when it comes to representatives of the authorities of Albanian nationality. With them, there is no communication at all, and the situation was better before Prime Minister Kurti came to power:

*“Only if there is a press conference and we get a chance to ask Kurti, Vjosa Osmani, or another official a question. They behave completely ignorantly towards the entire Serbian community, as well as towards the media. Since he came to power, Kurti has not given an exclusive statement or interview to any Serbian television, radio station, or Serbian media.”*

### **Censorship and Self-censorship**

Interviewed journalists generally agree that there is both censorship and self-censorship in the Serbian media in Kosovo. Still, they generally do not see themselves being subject to it.

*“Those pressures obviously exist; I faced one of those...I think that some media and journalists already know what they should report and that they cannot write about it due to some political structures. There is already a pattern about what can and cannot be written. I think it exists in certain media.”*

As one journalist explains, attempts at censorship happen quite subtly and not so openly. That is why she believes that there is more self-censorship than censorship:

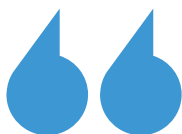
*“I had a situation with a colleague from another newsroom who called me openly. First, she started with a joke that I shouldn’t publish it because, well, it’s stupid; the answer we got from a representative of an institution is stupid. Then, when she realized I intended to publish, she called me again. She told the same story about how nonsense was what was told to us in the statement and how we shouldn’t publish it, and she kept repeating the same message. Well, it was definitely an attempt to pressure.”*

Finances, “where the money goes,” respectively writing about tenders and project contractors who received money from the state or international fund but did not complete the project, are listed as another tricky topic that is considered prohibited.

It is further pointed out that the local media can write about “petty fraud and petty crime,” but they are either unable to write about something more significant due to the financial situation and lack of capacity or are simply afraid of the consequences.

As the journalists explain, the topics of corruption and major crime are topics that require courage and journalistic ethics, but also interlocutors, which are difficult to find in small communities, where people are afraid to speak out about such things, either publicly or anonymously. Therefore, it is not uncommon to abandon the story due to the lack of interlocutors, who are essential for proving the facts.

As they say, regional media, such as BIRN or investigative media from Belgrade, deal with in-depth investigative work. Journalists from Serbian communities in Kosovo say that interlocutors prefer to respond to media that come from outside and media that are perceived as regional and “big” media.



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On the other hand, there are also criticisms directed at the local media that they often choose their interlocutors based on whether they suit them privately or not. "It happens that we do not perceive as interlocutors the people whom the Belgrade media perceive as interlocutors. Because we know them from the town and some other stories, so they are not good enough interlocutors for us. That is wrong because, if he has information that he is presenting publicly and it is in the public's interest to know that information, it is no longer important what that person is in private life."

### **Lack of Capacities**

The lack of capacities, i.e., personnel, is underlined as the main reason Serbian-language media in Kosovo do not engage in investigative work or very little. Also, some journalists stated that the media outlets do not even have the

capacity to cover local events because they require going to the field and distributing work, which they are not able to carry out due to the small number of employees. The lack of capacities is closely related to funding but also brain drain. As one journalist points out, "Young people have a hard time deciding whether to stay in journalism. It usually lasts for several months. The first opportunity that opens up for them to do something else, they take it and do it."

### **Financing**

One of the biggest problems the media face, which prevents them from fully responding to the needs of citizens, is funding. The media needs long-term, systematic support for their work, "for the production of content, not for debates, discussions and other public activities."

As the journalists point out, there is no way of self-sustainability of the media through media services, and they are increasingly resorting to becoming a non-governmental organization in order to be financed through project budgets.

## 4. Recommendations

### Recommendations for the media

#### TO REPORT ON LOCAL TOPICS

This year's research confirms the trend established during 2020-2021 that Serbian-language media in Kosovo lack more journalistic products related to local issues. The reasons for this are small newsrooms, the fact that citizens hesitate to speak publicly, but also that local institutions do not answer journalists' questions. Therefore, it is necessary to find ways to make local topics more visible in the public domain, even in other creative ways, not necessarily through a classic journalistic story (photo reportage about a local problem or topic on the media's website or social networks, video, phono or online survey about pollution, water supply, sewage maintenance, food prices or other local topics.)

#### TO EXPLORE AUDIENCE NEEDS

In Kosovo, media in the Serbian language are primarily focused on political topics, the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, and other current daily political events. Due to the lack of capacities, they are often unable to deal with topics such as culture, sports, art, economy, and others in the interest of the public and citizens. Hence, periodic public opinion and target audience polling are necessary to adapt their reporting to the needs of citizens.

#### TO REPORT PRESSURE AND ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

All interviewed journalists faced some kind of pressure during their work, but not all of them were active enough in reporting it. Journalists themselves should be more involved in reporting any type of pressure (live or online), whether it comes from editors, government representatives, or citizens. It happens that journalists do not treat specific comments or messages they receive live or through social networks seriously, so they need to be encouraged to do so by journalist associations and international or domestic organizations that deal with media freedoms.



## Recommendations for the institutions

### TO ANSWER TO JOURNALISTS' INQUIRIES

Lack of access to public documents and untimely responses from institutions and local governments to the media is another trend that repeats year after year. Getting answers within the legally prescribed deadlines, getting answers to specific questions and the possibility of getting answers in the Serbian language are difficulties that journalists still encounter in their daily work. This trend must change, and employees in institutions and political representatives must be accountable for the public's interest.

### TO PROMPTLY SOLVE REPORTED CASES OF PRESSURE AND ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

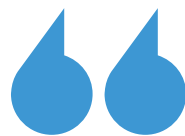
Pressure on journalists and the targeting of journalists and the media are unacceptable, whether they come from individuals, politicians, or government representatives. However, it is necessary to establish a safe environment for the work of journalists, so it is vital that reported cases of attacks and pressure on journalists are resolved promptly to show an example of good practice but also to serve as a warning to those who can potentially put pressure on journalists.

### TO ENSURE SUSTAINABLE FUNDS FOR FINANCING THE WORK OF MINORITY MEDIA

It is also necessary to establish clear procedures for allocating funds, representing a reliable mechanism for supporting the work of the media. Finally, it is essential to ensure the transparency of the entire process of allocating funds.

### TO ADJUST THE FUNDS TO THE NEEDS OF THE MEDIA

Media representatives increasingly point out that one of the problems they face is that donors do not recognize media content as a project activity and that journalists are often forced to do tasks typical of non-governmental organizations. Therefore, it is necessary for donors to support freedom of expression and objective journalistic reporting more, i.e., to adjust calls for project proposals to the basic activity of the media.



All interviewed journalists faced some kind of pressure during their work, but not all of them were active enough in reporting it. Journalists themselves should be more involved in reporting any type of pressure (live or online), whether it comes from editors, government representatives, or citizens.



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