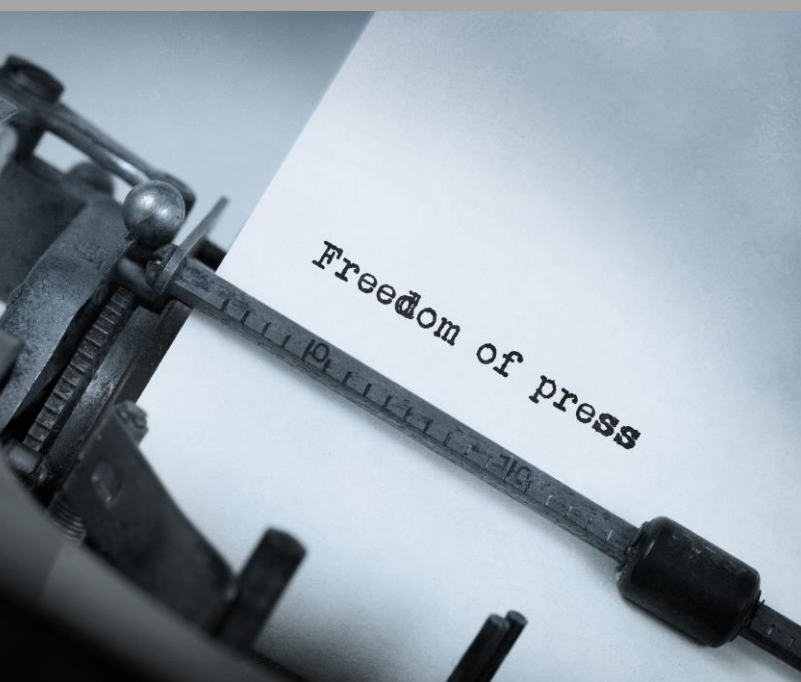


SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS

Behind the headlines: Threats, attacks and pressure on journalists in Serbia



Ivo Čolović
Author

Co-funded
by the European Union



EUROPEAN UNION

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Co-funded and implemented
by the Council of Europe

This research was produced with the financial support of the European Union and the Council of Europe, through the joint programme "Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye", within the joint action "Protecting freedom of expression and of the media in Serbia (PROFLEX)".

Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author. Views expressed herein can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the European Union or the Council of Europe.

This research was conducted in collaboration with the Association of Journalists of Serbia (UNS) and the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia (NUNS), as part of the action and without financial support to the Associations. These associations played a key role in formulating the questionnaire and facilitating contact with journalists and media workers.

The reproduction of extracts (up to 500 words) is authorised, except for commercial purposes as long as the integrity of the text is preserved, the excerpt is not used out of context, does not provide incomplete information or does not otherwise mislead the reader as to the nature, scope or content of the text. The source text must always be acknowledged as follows "© Council of Europe, 2024". All other requests concerning the reproduction/translation of all or part of the document, should be addressed to the Directorate of Communications, Council of Europe (F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex or publishing@coe.int).

All other correspondence relating to this publication should be addressed to: Directorate General Human Rights and Rule of Law, Information Society Department: Avenue de l'Europe F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex, France, Tel. +33 (0)3 88 41 20 00;

E-mail: Horizontal.Facility@coe.int

© Council of Europe, March 2024. All rights reserved. Licensed to the European Union under conditions.

Photo: ©Shutterstock



Content

INTRODUCTION.....	4
SUMMARY	5
1 RESEARCH RESULTS	8
1.1 Work experience of journalists and perception of economic dynamics/pressure of the media environment in Serbia	8
1.2 Self-censorship among journalists in Serbia.....	11
1.3 Threats, violence and reporting violence/threats.....	17
1.4 Digital violence	23
2 SUPPORT IN PROVIDING PROTECTION AND SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS	27
3 RECOMMENDATIONS.....	31

INTRODUCTION

For years now, various [reports](#) have warned of an increase in violence against journalists around the world, and attacks and intimidation are taking new forms and becoming more serious every year. Journalists around the world report in a hostile environment, and threats come from various social actors, including political leaders. At the same time, failure to prosecute attacks on journalists and lack of justice leads to distrust among journalists that they will be protected even if they report attacks and threats. The result of this situation is that journalists often refrain from reporting attacks, and instead choose strategies of self-censorship or restraint on reporting on certain topics. The 2023 [report](#) on Serbia of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights shows that the situation in Serbia is no different. The Commissioner “calls on the authorities to ensure the safety of journalists, which remains a serious human rights concern in Serbia”. At the time of publication of the report (September 2023), there were 65 active warnings on the Council of Europe [Platform for the Safety of Journalists](#) regarding Serbia, of which 22 relate to physical attacks. In addition, in 2023, Serbia fell from 79th to 91st place on Reporters Without Borders' press freedom index¹.

Overall, a safe media environment is not only essential for preserving the integrity of the journalistic profession, but also for strengthening democracy, human rights and public trust in media institutions. Self-censorship, threats and violence (including digital violence) are serious obstacles to achieving these goals. Therefore, it is essential to work to create an environment where journalists can freely do their job without fear and pressure.

This report analyses the perception of the media environment by journalists, including the existence of self-censorship and the factors leading to it. It also examines the threats journalists face, their exposure to various forms of violence, and the reactions of journalists and institutions to these issues. The aim is to identify potential solutions and make recommendations for improving the working conditions of journalists and strengthening media freedom in the country.

The research was conducted in December 2023, on a sample of 130 journalists in Serbia in cooperation with the Journalists' Association of Serbia (JAS) and the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS).² A random representative sample was used, consisting of 130 media workers (journalists). Gender representativeness is evenly distributed, and 50% of the sample is made up of women and 50% of men journalists. The average number of years of work experience is 22 years, whereas the largest number of respondents has between 15 and 30 years of service.

¹ <https://rsf.org/en/country/serbia>

² All terms used in the masculine grammatical gender include the masculine and feminine gender of the person to whom they relate.

SUMMARY

More than half of the journalists (53.8%) said they had been in a situation where they did not report on a topic or event one or more times. *Women report above average that they have been in this situation once or more times.* The most frequent reasons for this decision are the fear for personal safety (23.7%), ethical dilemmas whether to report or not (21.6%) and pressure from employers or superiors (17.5%).

Among the journalists who have had experience with self-censorship, the dominant majority (68.7%) of journalists believe that self-censorship has affected their journalistic work and the quality of the information they shared with the public (mostly by not publishing the story they planned to publish or limiting the scope and importance of the story, and a smaller share also considers it, to have led to a lack of key information for the public). About half of the journalists who experienced self-censorship regretted this decision (53.1%), primarily because the public was deprived of important information.

In the option of possible multiple responses, economic pressures, i.e. political pressures and government interference, stood out as factors that the majority of the journalists recognise as crucial for the existence of self-censorship (62.7% and 65.5%, respectively). Inappropriate influence by owners is a factor around which respondents are divided (44.1% believe that this factor contributes to self-censorship, and the opposite opinion is shared by 46.6%). On the other hand, factors such as inappropriate influence by editors, threat of court proceedings/lack of legal protection, fear of physical assault, as well as social norms and expectations, have little or no influence on the emergence of self-censorship in the perception of journalists (this is especially true for the factor of social norms and expectations). However, when respondents were asked to single out only one of the most important factors contributing to self-censorship, economic pressure came first (29.3%), with political pressure and government interference (25%) and fear of physical assault (18.1%), following.

Journalists recognised three elements that could lead to a decrease in self-censorship and promote more open and courageous journalism - greater public awareness and advocacy for media freedom (23.4%), regulated legal status of journalists (24.1%) and improved legal protection of journalists (25.3%). In other words, although the lack of legal protection is not recognised as one of the main factors leading to the emergence of self-censorship, journalists still believe that improving the legal framework and protection of journalists, i.e. raising public awareness, would still contribute to the reduction of self-censorship among journalists.

Institutional pressures are a form of threat that most journalists often and regularly encounter in their work (46.2%), followed by economic pressures or job insecurity (40.2%). 29.9% of journalists often or regularly encounter the problem of targeting and smearing campaigns, and 30.5% reported that they regularly or frequently face verbal threats. SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) lawsuits were experienced frequently or regularly by 17.1% of journalists, physical assault was never experienced by 58.5% of journalists, every fourth experienced this rarely (25.4%), every ninth frequently (11%), and regularly 2.5% of respondents. Attack on property was experienced regularly or frequently by 7.8% of respondents, 18.1% rarely, and 72.4% never. *Male journalists report above average higher incidence of physical assaults.*

Every third journalist in Serbia (33.9%) was threatened for reporting in the last year, while 64.4% of respondents did not have such experience. Just over half of them reported threats.

Journalists reporting on illegal activities and corruption answered above average that they reported threats, while journalists who most often report on current affairs and news, above average responded that they did not report threats.

Journalists in Serbia assess the reaction of state authorities in cases of reported security threats as inadequate (90%), and 75% of respondents say that the attitude of state authorities towards them (when they reported threats) was more or less negative.

Among journalists who have experienced threats due to their work in the past year, the largest number of threats came either from anonymous senders (14.1%) or from people who declare themselves as supporters of a political party (14.1%), followed by threats from public officials (13.1%) and ordinary citizens (13.1%), and 12.1% of journalists who were threatened received these threats from politicians.

Journalists identify the origins of threats in the hindrance of text or article publication, (35%) of documented instances, or influence on media content (32.5%). Among those subjected to threats, attacks, and pressures, one in four attested to a discernible impact on their physical health (25%). Additionally, 40% reported observable modifications in behaviour, characterised by heightened states of anxiety, discomfort, and trepidation. Moreover, 20% acknowledged a reduction in job satisfaction stemming from these.

Consequently, a) some journalists are now more determined to do their job, b) others avoid certain places, c) the third group chooses the words more carefully in their contributions (all three groups make up 18.6% of respondents each).

A majority (53%) of journalists stated they have never been a victim of digital violence, while an aggregate 39.2% say they have been a victim of digital violence (of which 9.6% once and 29.6% more than once). The most common forms of digital violence faced by journalists in Serbia are trolling (65.9% regularly or frequently), cyberbullying (56.8%) and false impersonation (41.9%). Sharing false information, as well as phishing are forms of violence that every third journalist in Serbia experiences frequently or regularly, while hacking and doxing are the least represented forms of digital violence. Journalists who experienced digital violence say that it was most often directed by "common" citizens (22.4%), or that they were anonymous threats (18.1%) and people expressing themselves as supporters of political parties (16.4%). 44.4% of journalists reported this violence, while 55.6% did not report it. As a reason for non-reporting, they equally singled out distrust in responsible institutions and not considering violence seriously (22.2% each). The lack of time and understanding on whom to report digital violence, did not stand out as factors leading to non-reporting of digital violence.

The overall level of safety and protection of journalists in Serbia is assessed by respondents as very poor (37.4%) and poor (29.6%). One in four respondents (24.3%) believe that the safety and protection of journalists is mediocre, and the aggregate number of only 5.2% believe that safety and

protection is good or very good. The largest number of respondents (46.1%) agreed that institutionally effective legal protection of journalists is necessary to support journalists in addressing threats and attacks and to encourage them to report such incidents, one in four journalists (26.1%) believe that it is necessary to introduce stricter penalties for those who threaten or commit violence, and one in ten (10.4%) believe that a campaign to raise public awareness of the importance of media freedom is necessary. In the event of threats and attacks due to reporting, respondents state that they would first contact their editor (26.1%) or the journalists' association to which they belong (21.7%). *Men journalists indicate that they would report to the journalists' association to which they belong and the media management, whereas women journalists would rather report to their editor and family members /people from close surrounding.*

Every third journalist is fully aware of the existing mechanisms regarding the safety of journalists and the established system of contact points in the responsible institutions (33.9%). Partial familiarity was reported by the largest number of respondents (42.6%), and 23.5% admit that they are not familiar with the existing mechanisms. Most journalists (57.4%) admit that they have never sought legal help and support from journalists' and media associations. Just over a third of respondents who sought help were more or less satisfied with the legal aid and support they received. However, these data should be taken with reservation because over two-fifths of respondents (44.6%) declined to answer this question.

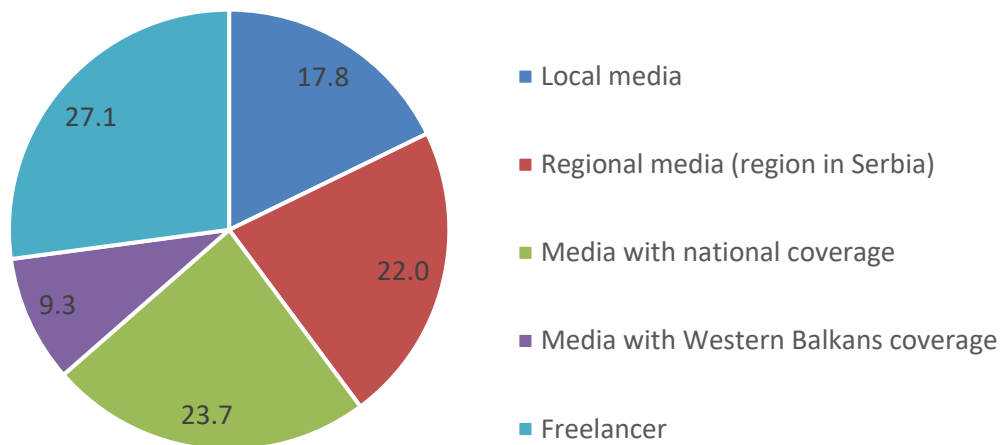
1 RESEARCH RESULTS

1.1 Work experience of journalists and perception of economic dynamics/pressure of the media environment in Serbia

The majority of journalists who made up the investigative sample were so-called freelancers (27.1%), 23.7% work in a media with national coverage, 22% in the regional, and 17.8% of respondents work in local media. One in 11 respondents work in a media covering the Western Balkans region (9.3%) – Chart 1.

The average number of years of work experience is 22 years, the largest number of respondents has between 15 and 30 years of service, which indicates that majority of respondents have decades of experience.

Chart 1. Media type, by coverage volume, in %



Looking at the type of media channel, i.e. based on the format of information distribution, **most journalists reported working in online media** (whether it is newspapers, websites, or social networks), that is 41.2%.

Every fifth journalist (21%) works in several media, 16.8% of respondents work for television, 9.2% works for printed daily newspapers, 8.4% for a weekly, monthly or magazine, and only 3.4% of them are employed as radio journalists – Chart 2.

Chart 2. Media type, in %

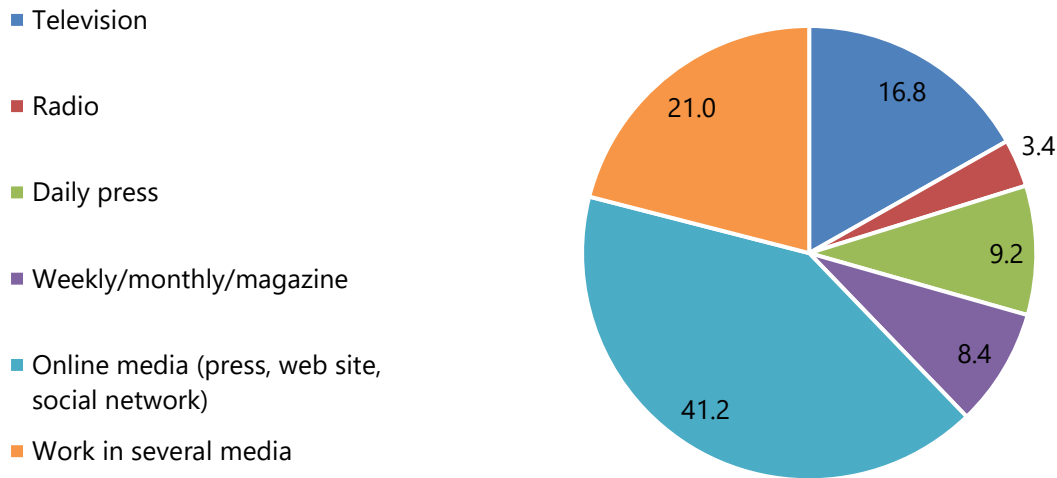
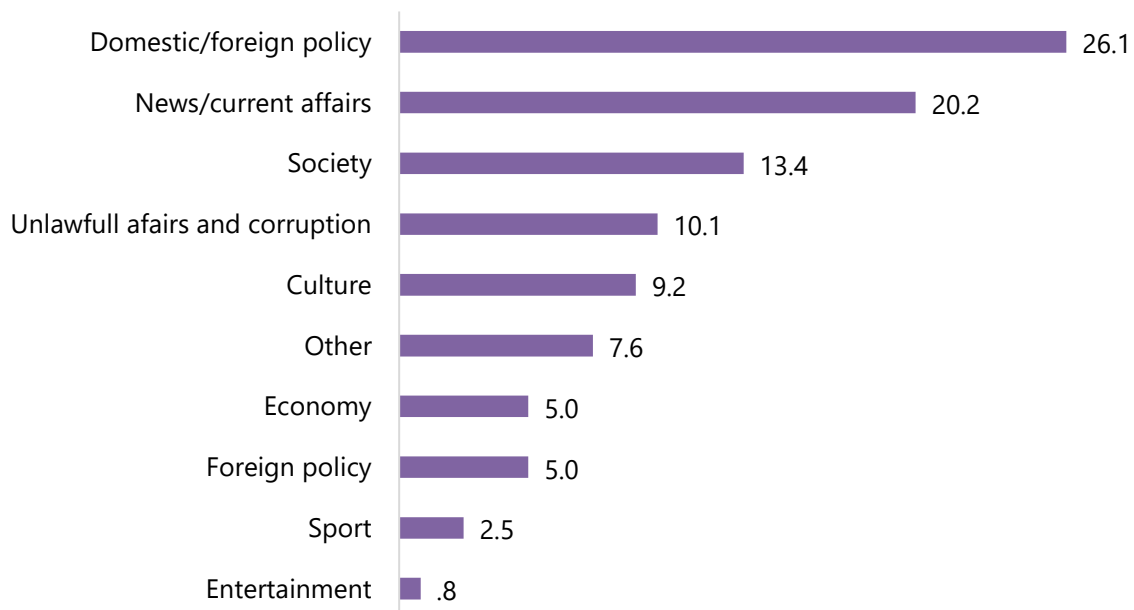


Chart 3 shows topics that journalists most often report on. **The largest number of journalists in their work most often report on domestic/internal politics and news/current affairs** – almost every fourth respondent (26.1%) stated that they deal with topics of domestic politics and another 20.2% cover news and current affairs. The wider category of current affairs cover 13.4% of respondents, and every tenth journalist predominantly reports on unlawful activities and corruption. Also, 9.2% of them most often report on topics in the field of culture, and 5% each on topics of economics/economy and foreign policy. Sports as a topic is covered by 2.5% of journalists involved in the research.

Graphics 3. Which topic do you report most often?, in %



Faced with the challenges of contemporary journalism, the key factor shaping the media landscape is economic dynamics. Economic pressure not only directly affects journalists, but deeply permeates the structure of media organisations, raising questions about the sustainability and independence of journalism. Journalists answered a number of key questions (Chart 4) concerning the economic dimension of the journalistic profession and its impact on freedom of expression, which touch on various aspects of economic dynamics in the media, exploring how economic pressure leads to self-censorship among journalists, what is the risk of job loss and job insecurity, how advertisers influence editorial content, and whether state funding can provide protection for journalistic freedom. Response analysis has provided a better understanding of the complex link between economics and journalism that can improve and find potential solutions to preserve the integrity of the journalistic profession in the contemporary volatile state of the media environment.

Chart 4. Perception of the economic dynamics of the media landscape and economic pressures, in %

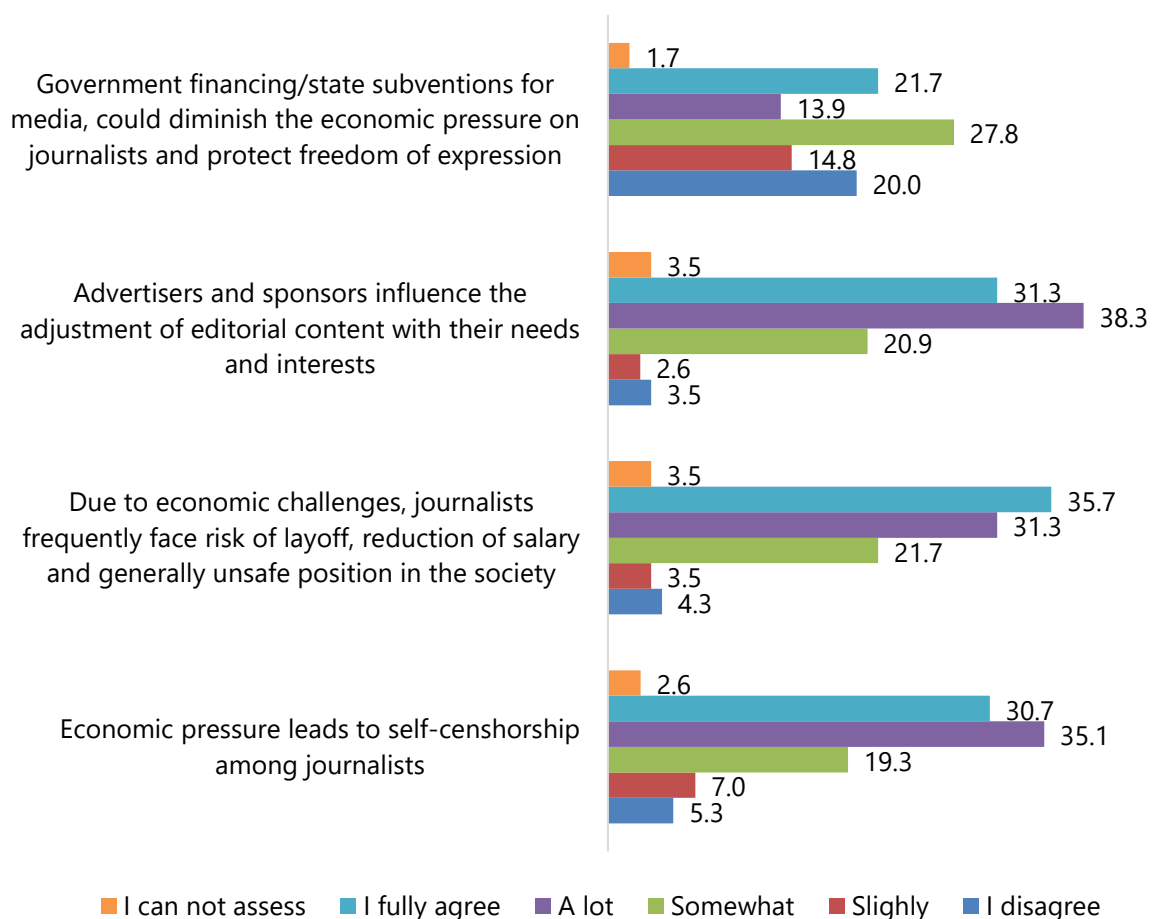


Chart 4 shows a detailed distribution of answers to four set statements. Taken collectively, **two-thirds of journalists (65.7%) more or less agree that economic pressure leads to self-censorship among journalists**, 19% somewhat agree with this view, and only 12.2% of respondents more or less disagree with the claim. **66.9% of respondents generally agree that due to economic pressure, journalists often face the risk of dismissal, salary reduction and precarious position in the society,**

21.7% agree somewhat, and only 7.8% of respondents have the opposite opinion. **With the statement that advertisers and sponsors often influence the adaptation of editorial content to their interests and needs, 69.5% of journalists collectively agree, 20.9% somewhat agree, and 6% of respondents more or less disagree.** Finally, **35.6% of journalists believe that government funding and state subsidies to media organisations could alleviate economic pressure on journalists and protect freedom of expression,** but almost as many disagree with this statement (34.7%), while 27.8% are undecided or only somewhat agree with the statement.

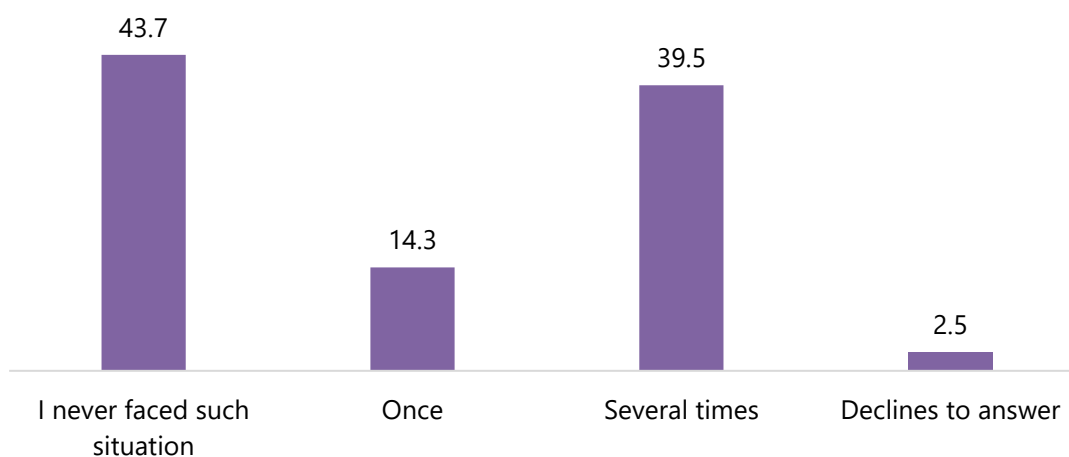
While the age of the respondents, as well as the length of work experience, i.e. journalistic experience, generally do not record a statistical association with the answers to the posed questions, only the replies related to the impact of government financing and state subsidies do. Namely, with the increase in the number of years of experience, i.e. *with the increase in the number of years of journalistic experience, the likelihood increases that respondents will agree with the claim that government funding and state subsidies to media organisations could alleviate economic pressure on journalists and protect freedom of expression.*

1.2 Self-censorship among journalists in Serbia

In a contemporary journalistic environment, where freedom of expression is the foundation of a democratic society, the issue of self-censorship among journalists is becoming crucial for understanding the challenges facing the journalistic profession. Investigating the existence of self-censorship among journalists is imperative because it contributes to the perception of the reality in which journalistic content is shaped and distributed. This phenomenon directly affects freedom of expression, the quality of journalistic reporting, as well as the attitude of journalists towards key social issues.

Chart 8 illustrates journalists' reflections on whether, during their career, they have encountered situations leading to the decision not to cover a particular topic or event.

Chart 5. In your career as a journalist, have you ever decided not to report on a topic or an event? In %

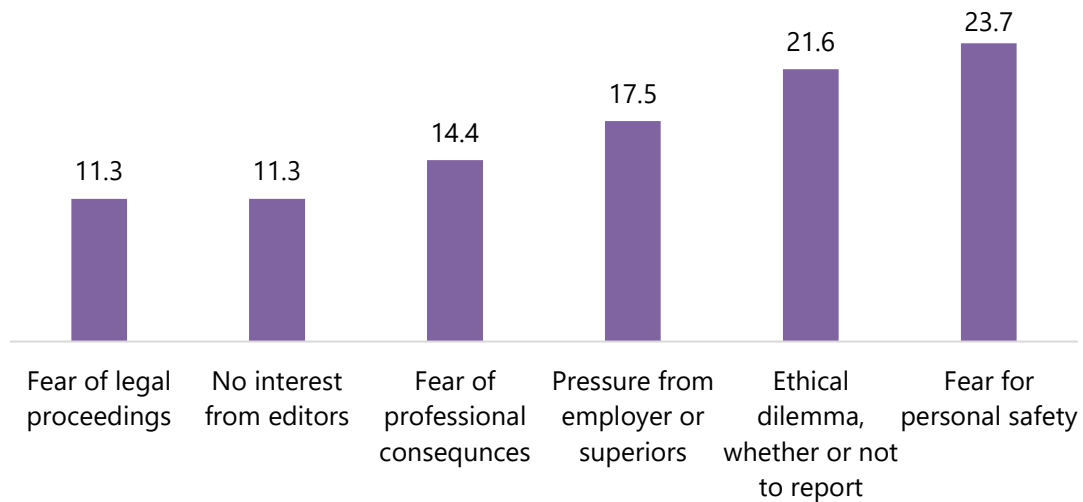


39.5% of journalists admitted that they had repeatedly decided not to report on a topic or event, and another 14.3% stated that they had once been in such a situation.

This means that a **majority of journalists (53.8%) stated that they were in a situation where they did not report on a topic or event** once or more, and 43.7 journalists did not report such experience. This question was not answered by 2.5% of journalists. *Women journalists report above average that they have been in this situation once or more.*

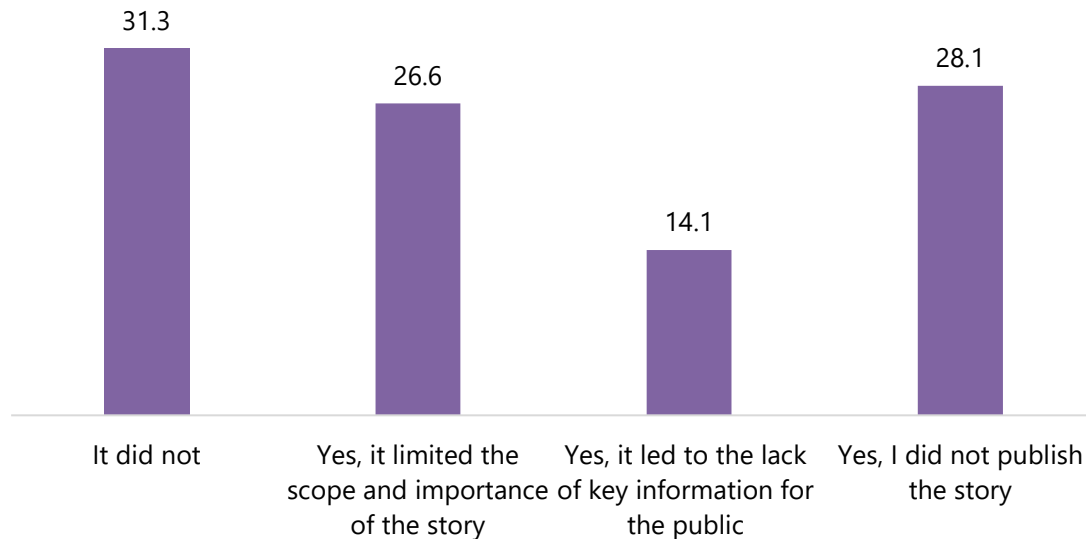
Chart 6 provides insight into the fundamental rationales behind choosing not to report on a particular topic or event. Respondents were permitted to provide multiple responses, and the Chart consolidates these perspectives.

Chart 6 What specific reasons/factors influenced you to decide not to report on a topic or event?, in %



Namely, **among those who decided not to report on a topic or event in their journalistic career, the most frequent reasons for this decision were fear for personal safety (23.7%), ethical dilemmas about whether to report or not (21.6%) and pressure from employers or supervisors (17.5%).** In addition, 14.4% of respondents cited concern for professional consequences, and 11.3% cited editors' lack of interest or fear of exposure to court proceedings. There are no observed statistically significant regularities between responses, basic sociodemographic and professional characteristics of the subjects.

Chart 7. Has self-censorship influenced your journalistic work and the quality of the information you shared with the public? In %

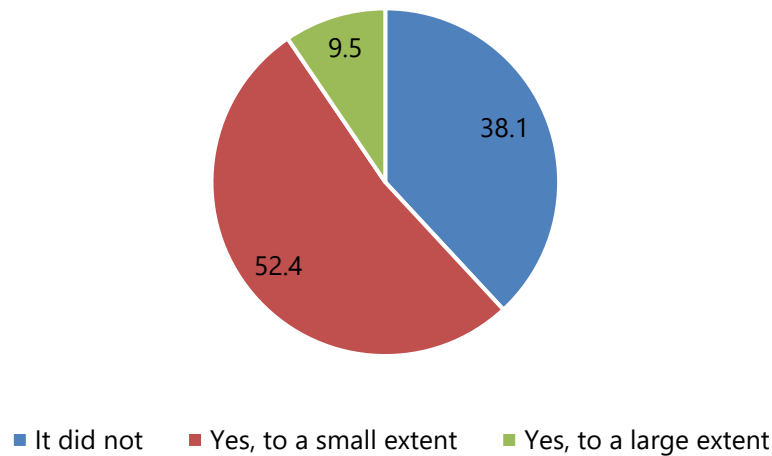


Approximately one-third of the surveyed journalists (31.3%) hold the belief, based on their self-assessment, that self-censorship has not impacted their journalistic endeavours or compromised the quality of the information they disseminate to the public.

Conversely, a significant majority of journalists (68.7%) asserted that self-censorship has had an impact on both their professional undertakings and the quality of information conveyed to the public, of which 28.1% refraining from publishing intended stories, 26.6% stated that self-censorship limited the scope and importance of the story, and for 14.1% self-censorship resulted in an absence of vital information for the public.

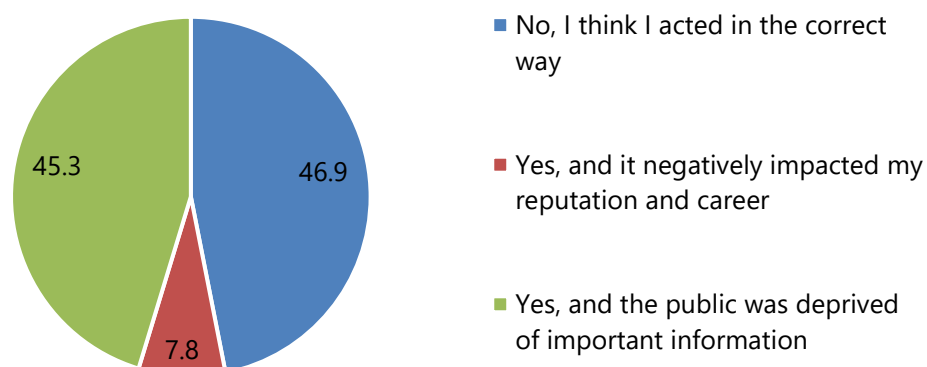
Respondents who stated that self-censorship limited the scope and importance of the story, or that they did not publish the story they planned to publish due to self-censorship, were asked to assess whether self-censorship affected their professional credibility (Chart 8), where a majority believes that self-censorship affected their professional credibility to a small extent (52.4%), 9.5% still believe that this impact was significant on their professional credibility, while 38.1% believe that self-censorship has not affected their professional credibility.

Chart 8. Would you say that self-censorship has affected your professional credibility in %



Significant insight is that the majority of journalists who experienced self-censorship regretted this decision – cumulatively **53.1% of respondents regretted this decision, of which 7.8% due to its negative impact on reputation and career, and the dominant majority because the public remained deprived of important information.** On the other hand, the share of those who did not regret – 46.9% is not negligible, either.

Chart 9. Have you ever regretted the decision not to report on a topic or event, to self-censor?



When it comes to identifying the basic factors that influence the emergence of self-censorship among journalists in Serbia, respondents were asked to rate each of the individual factors as much as they believe they influence the emergence of self-censorship – Chart 10.

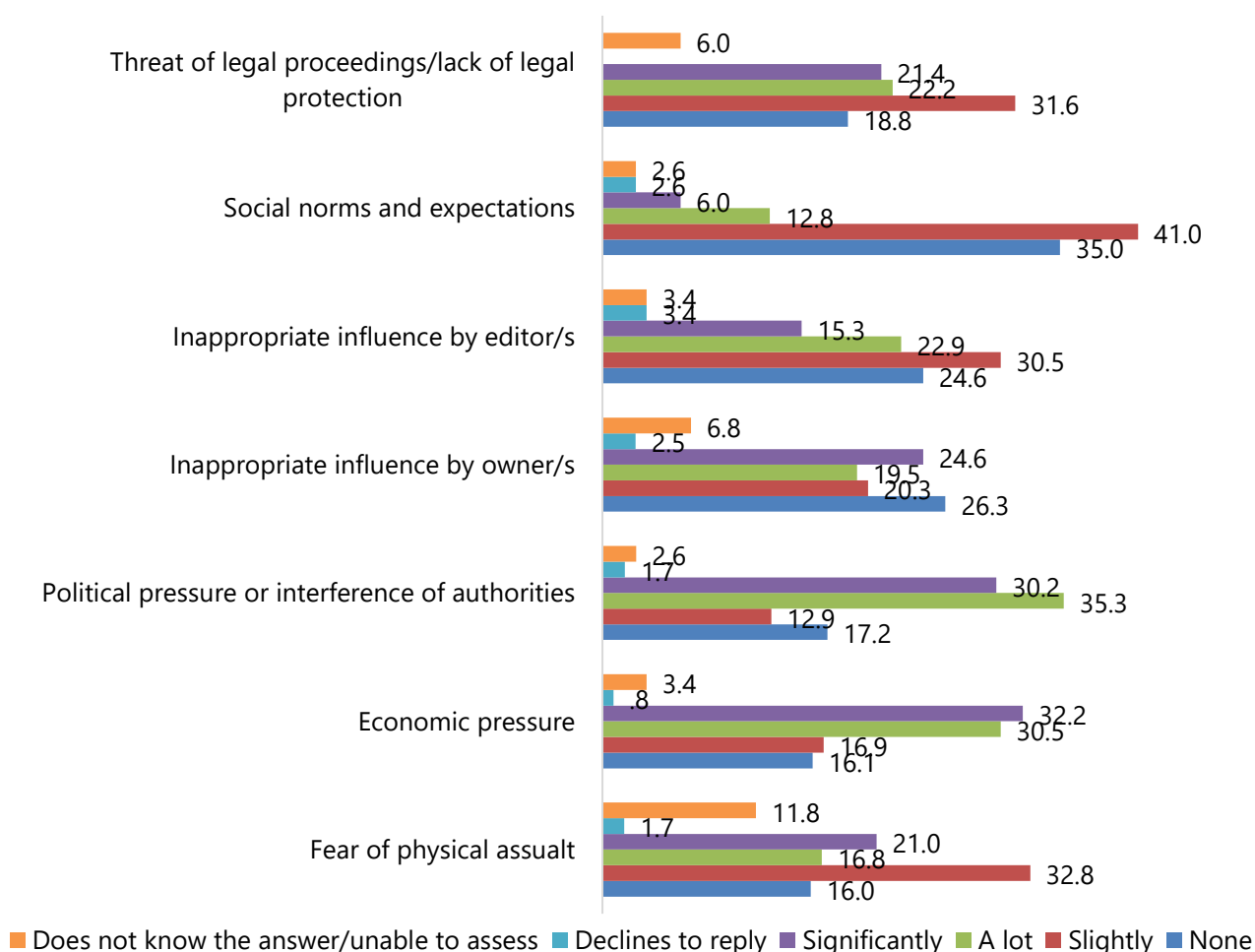
Collectively (Chart 10 portrays a more detailed view), **economic pressures, i.e. political pressures and government interferences have stood out as factors that the majority of journalists**

recognise as the main factors contributing to self-censorship. Thus, 65.5% of respondents agree that political pressure and government interference significantly or to a great extent affect the emergence of self-censorship. Also, 62.7% of respondents believe that economic pressures significantly or to a great extent affect the emergence of self-censorship.

Inappropriate influence by owners is a factor over which respondents are divided – while 44.1% of them more or less agree that this is a contributing factor to the emergence of self-censorship, the opposite opinion is shared among 46.6% of respondents.

However, prevailing beliefs indicate that **factors such as undue influence from editors, the looming threat of legal action or inadequate legal safeguards, the apprehension of physical harm, and adherence to societal norms and expectations are considered to have minimal or negligible influence on the manifestation of self-censorship.** This is especially true for the impact of social norms and expectations where a combined 76.1% of respondents said that this is a factor that has little or no influence on the occurrence of self-censorship.

Chart 10. Factors influencing self-censorship (In your opinion and experience so far, to what extent the following factors affect the occurrence of self-censorship?), in %

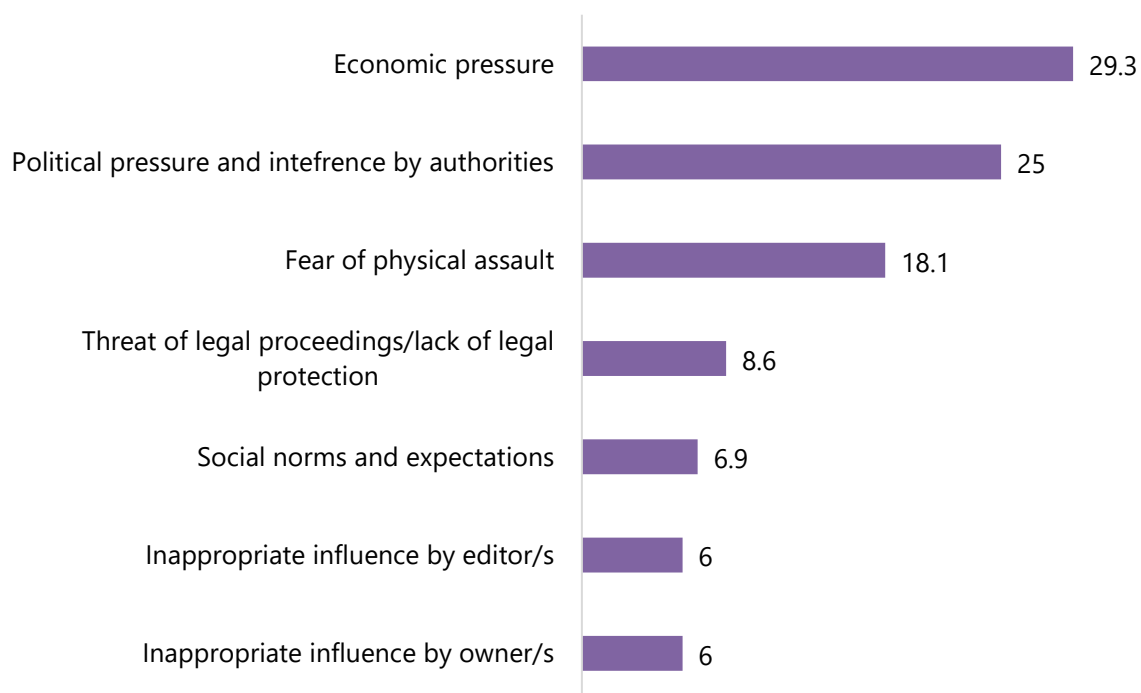


Most respondents have the same attitude when it comes to inappropriate influences by editors (55.1% believe that the impact is negligible or none on the occurrence of self-censorship) and the threat of court proceedings/lack of legal protection (50.4% believe that the impact is small or none on the occurrence of self-censorship).

48.7% of respondents consider that fear of physical violence is a factor that has little or no influence on self-censorship, while 37.8% of journalists have the opposite attitude. However, 11.8% of respondents could not assess or declined to answer.

Since respondents had previously evaluated each of the factors separately, they were subsequently asked to choose from the list, one of the factors that they believe mostly interferes with and influences the occurrence of self-censorship (Chart 11).

Figure 11. Which of the factors mainly leads to the occurrence of self-censorship to a greatest extent?, in %

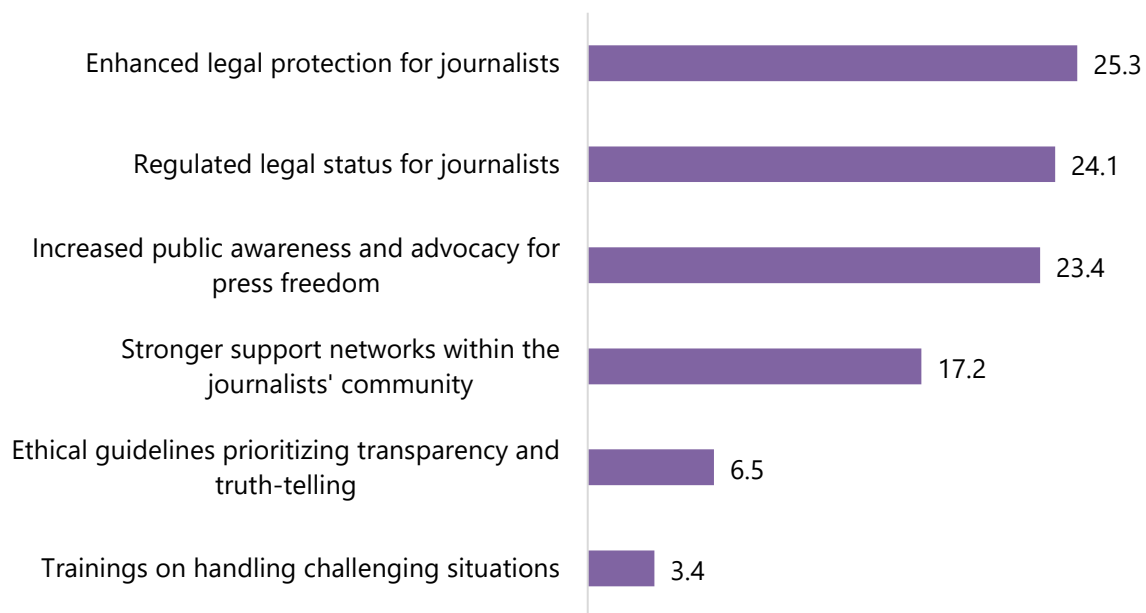


Economic pressure came first (29.3%), followed by political pressure or government interference (chosen by one in four respondents), and the fear of physical assault (18.1%) was third.

Other factors were singled out significantly fewer times – the threat of court proceedings and lack of legal protection is the main factor for 8.6% of journalists, social norms and expectations by 6.9%, and 6% of respondents cited inappropriate influences by editors and owners as the main factors for the emergence of self-censorship in Serbia.

In conclusion, journalists were tasked with selecting two options that, in their perspective, could contribute to diminishing self-censorship among their peers and fostering a climate conducive to more open and resolute journalism (see Chart 12). Respondents were not required to assign rankings; instead, they were given the opportunity to choose two options, and the responses are presented as a summary of their selections.

Chart 12. What would lead to a decrease in self-censorship among journalists and promote more open and courageous journalism?, in %

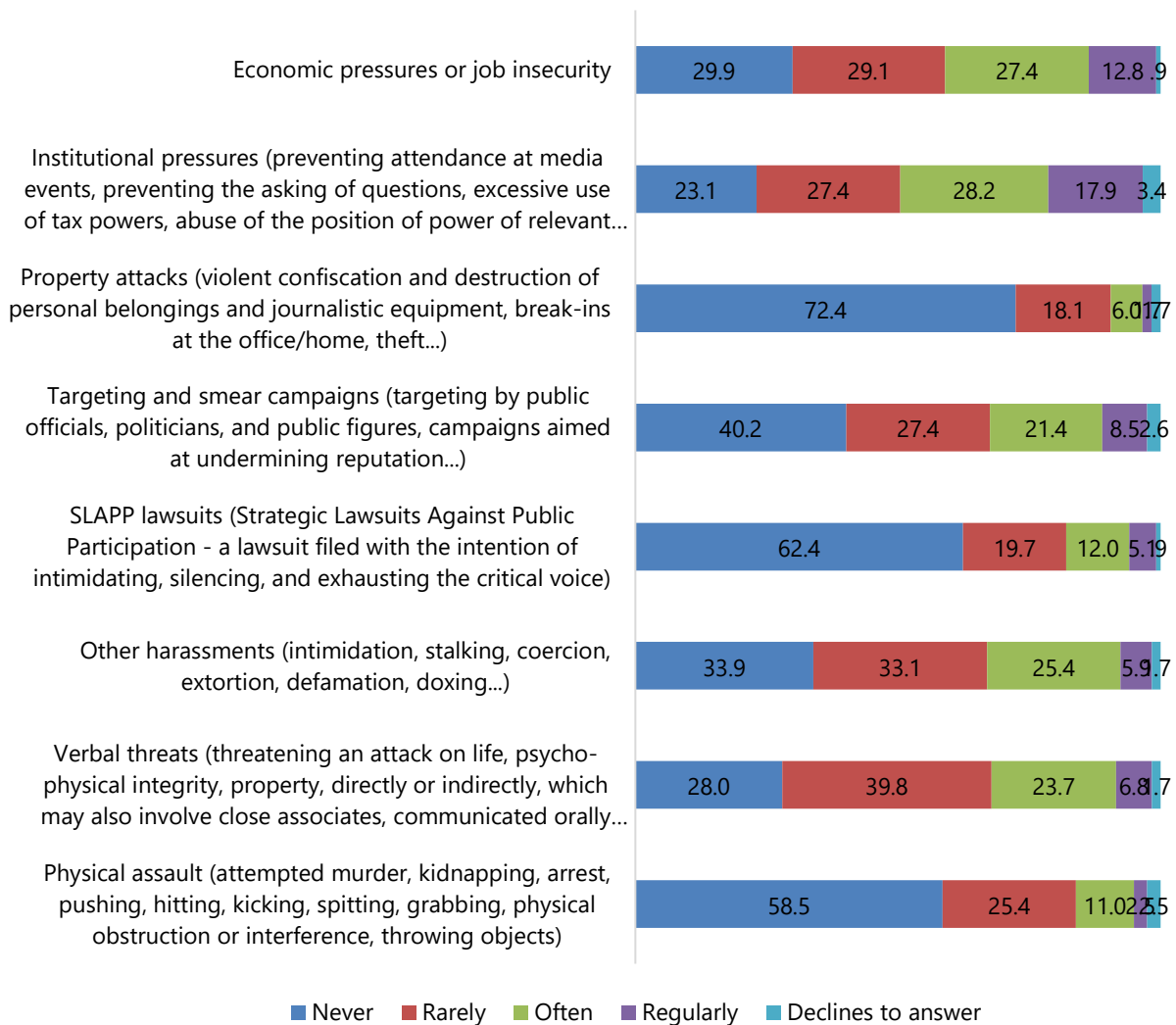


The results indicate that journalists have identified three elements that could **diminish self-censorship and foster a more open and courageous journalistic environment: heightened public awareness and advocacy for media freedom (23.4%), a regulated legal status for journalists (24.1%), and enhanced legal protection for journalists (25.3%)**. In essence, while the absence of legal protection was explicitly identified as a primary catalyst for self-censorship, journalists still maintain the belief that enhancing the legal framework and safeguarding journalists and initiatives such as raising public awareness, still play a pivotal role in mitigating self-censorship within the journalistic community.

1.3 Threats, violence and reporting violence/threats

In addition to the problem of self-censorship, the research also included the experiences of journalists with various forms of threats and violence in their work. How much, as journalists, they encountered various threats in the course of their work is presented in Chart 13.

Chart 13. How often, as a journalist, have you encountered any of the following threats in the course of your work? in %



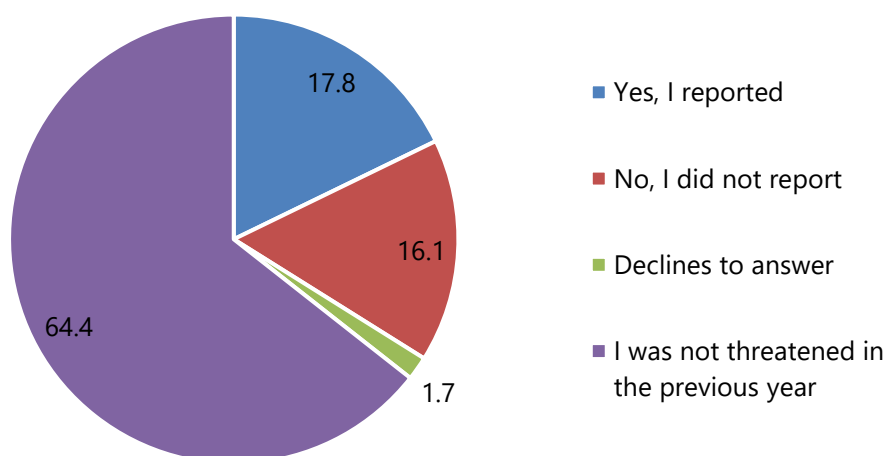
Institutional pressures (preventing access to media events, discouraging questions, excessive use of tax authority, abuse of the position of power of the competent authorities, no reply of institutions to journalists' questions, etc.) are a form of threats that most journalists often and regularly encounter in their work – overall, 46.2% of respondents said that they often or regularly encounter this type of pressure (of which 17.9% regularly), 27.4% rarely, and 23.1% never.

In addition to institutional, economic pressures or job insecurity are other more frequent threats that journalists in Serbia face - in total, 40.2% of respondents said that they often or regularly encounter this type of pressure, while 29.1% rarely, and 29.9% have never encountered such pressures.

The problem of targeting and smear campaigns (targeting by public officials, politicians and public figures, campaigns aimed at ruining reputation...) often or regularly encounters aggregate 29.9% of journalists, and 30.5% reported that they regularly or frequently face verbal threats (imminent threat to life, psycho-physical integrity, property, directly or indirectly, which may also apply to people close to journalists, directed verbally or in writing by all means of communication).

SLAPPs (strategic lawsuits against public participation - a lawsuit filed with the intent to intimidate, silence and exhaust the critical side) were often or regularly experienced in their work by 17.1% of journalists, while 19.7% of them rarely, and 62.4% never. **Physical assault** (attempted murder, kidnapping, arrest, pushing, punching, kicking, spitting, capturing, physical intimidation or distraction, throwing objects) has never been experienced by 58.5% of journalists, every fourth experienced this rarely (25.4%), every ninth often (11%), and regularly 2.5% of respondents. **Assault on property** (violent confiscation and destruction of personal belongings and journalistic equipment, burglaries in the newsroom/apartment, theft...) was experienced regularly or often, collectively by 7.8% of respondents, 18.1% rarely, and 72.4% never.

Figure 14. If you have been threatened in the last year because of your reporting, have you reported these threats to the competent authorities?, in %



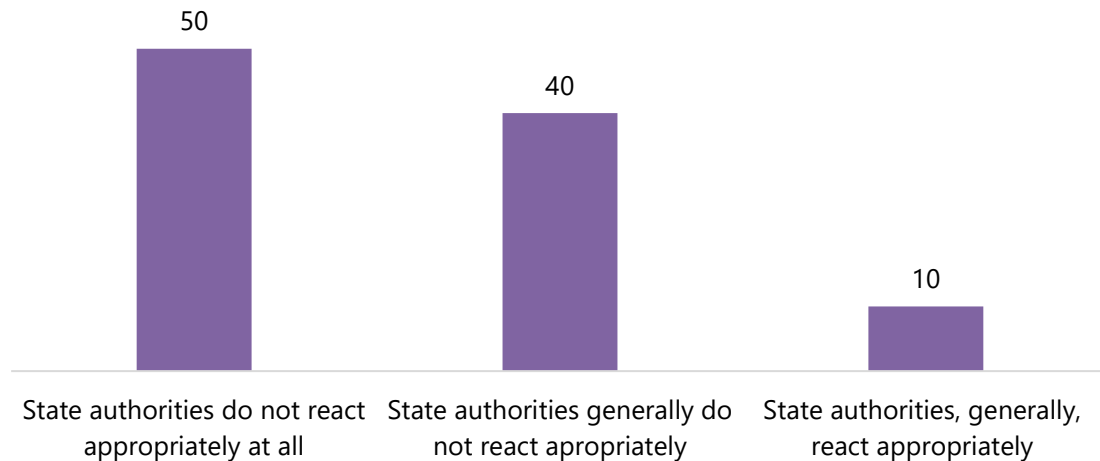
In terms of sociodemographic characteristics, gender stands out as statistically significant only in terms of physical assaults, where *men journalists report above average higher physical attacks*, while other types of threats and attacks do not record a statistically significant difference between male and female responses.

Every third journalist in Serbia (33.9%) was recently threatened for reporting, while 64.4% of respondents did not have such an experience.

Among those who experienced threats in the past year, **50% reported the threats, 45% did not report and 5% of respondents declined to answer.** A statistically significant relationship arose only between the topic on which journalists report most often and whether they reported the threat –

journalists reporting on illegal activities and corruption indicated above average that they reported threats, while journalists who most often report on current and regular news, above average responded that they did not report threats.

Chart 15. Based on your experience, evaluate the reaction of state authorities in cases of reported threats to the safety of journalists? in %

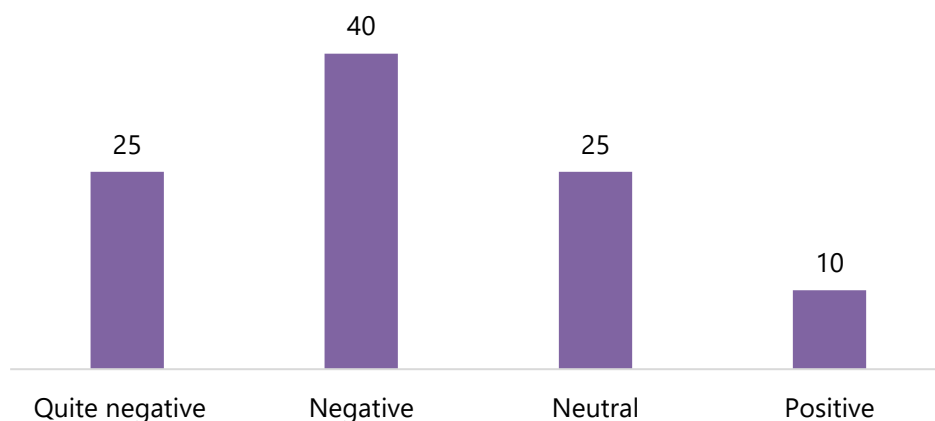


Journalists in Serbia assess the reaction of state authorities in cases of reported security threats as inadequate (90%) – every second journalist stated that state authorities do not react in the right way at all, another 40% of them assessed that they mostly do not react in the right way.

Only one in ten respondents (10%) said that state authorities generally react in the right way, while almost no one thinks that state authorities fully respond in the right way.

Journalists who found themselves in this situation and reported their experience to state authorities were asked to assess their attitude towards them during the proceedings – Chart 16.

Chart 16. Based on your experience when you reported threats to government authorities, how would you rate their attitude towards you during the proceedings? in %



Every fourth journalist who reported a threat to state authorities assessed the attitude of state authorities towards them as very negative.

40% of them rated this attitude as negative, which collectively means that **as many as 65% of respondents say that the attitude of state authorities was more or less negative**. A neutral attitude was reported by 25% of respondents with this experience, and only 10% of respondents evaluated it as positive.

Among journalists who have experienced threats due to their work in the past year, the largest number of threats came either from anonymous senders (14.1%) or from people who declare themselves as supporters of a political party (14.1%), followed by threats from public officials (13.1%) and ordinary citizens (13.1%), and 12.1% of journalists who were threatened received these threats from politicians.

Every tenth journalist was threatened by members of extremist organisations, 9.1% received the threat from employees in state/provincial/local self-government bodies, 5.1% from a fellow journalist, 4% from participants in the protest gathering, 3% from entrepreneurs, and 2% from public figures – chart 17.

Chart 17. If you've been threatened in the last year, who made the threats?

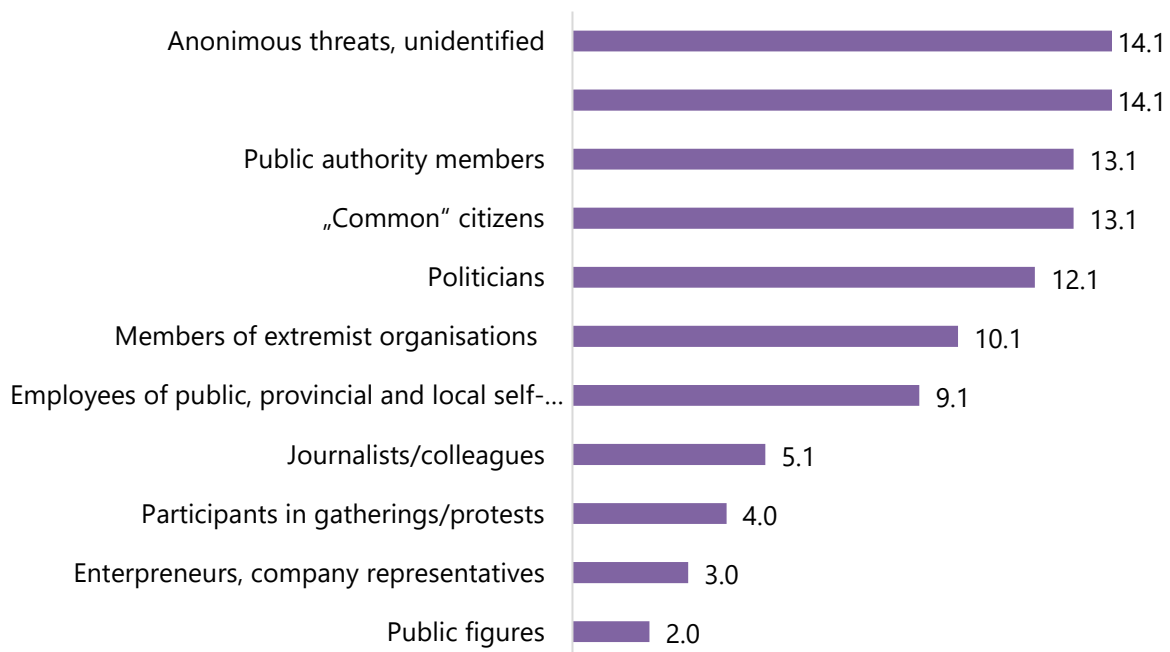
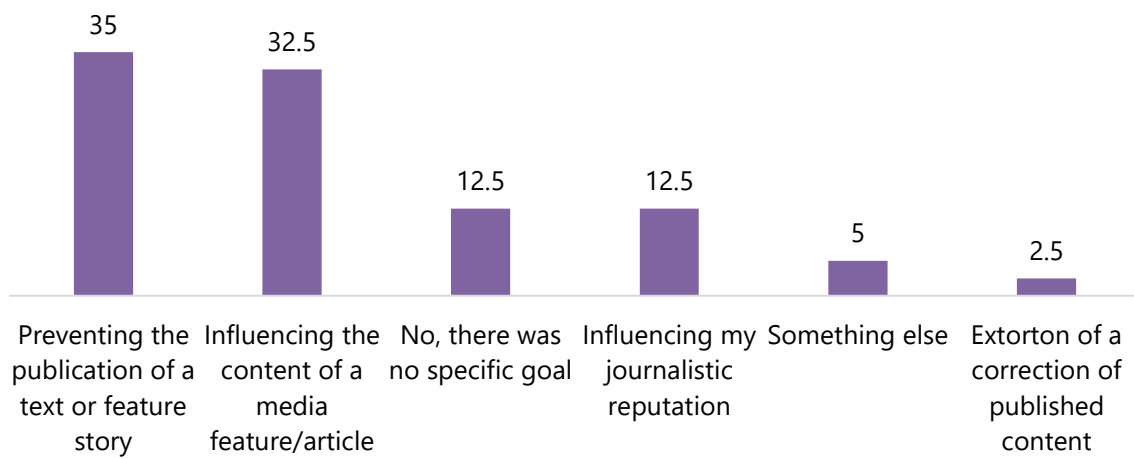


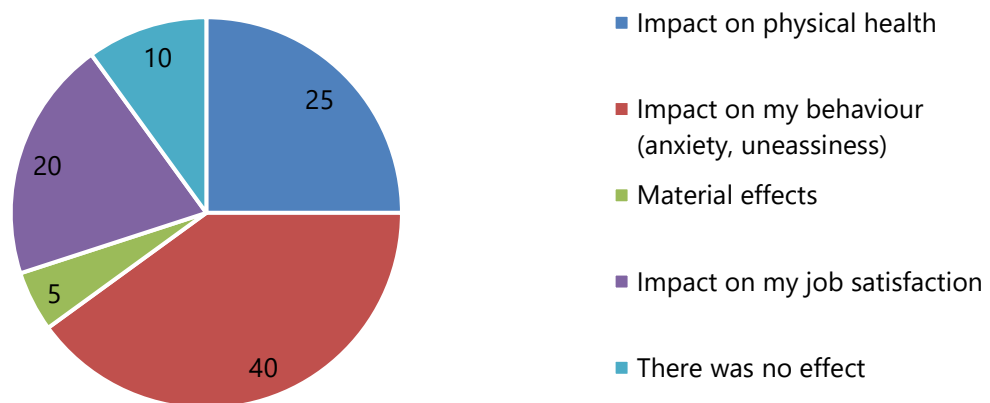
Chart 18 shows the distribution of answers to the question of what was the purpose of the aggression or threat addressed to journalists. The most frequent responses are in which **journalists believe that the purpose of aggression and threat was either to prevent the publication of the text /content (35%) or to influence the media content (32.5%)**.

Chart 18. In your opinion, what was the purpose of the aggression/threat addressed to you?



12.5% of respondents believe that there was no specific goal or that the goal is to influence their reputation, and 2.5% believe that it is to force the correction of published content.

Chart 19. What impact or consequences have such attacks and pressures on you personally had?, in %



Among those who experienced threats, attacks and pressures, one in four respondents said that they had an impact on his/her physical health (25%), 40% reported an impact on behaviour (anxiety, discomfort, trepidation), 20% said it had an impact on their job satisfaction.

Material effects were reported by 5% of respondents, and that there was no effect was stated by only 10% of those who had such experiences – Chart 19.

Finally, when asked what kind of impact or consequences such incidents had on their professional work (Chart 20), 18.6% of the answers were given to the following options: that they are now more determined to do their job, to avoid certain places, and to choose words more carefully.

Chart 20. What kind of impact or consequences have such incidents had on your professional work?, in %



16.9% of respondents stated that aggressions or threats have no impact on their job performance, but the same number expressed doubts that they still want to continue journalism.

One in 10 respondents also answered that they no longer publish content on specific topics.

1.4 Digital violence

Digital violence against journalists poses a serious challenge in the modern information age, where technological progress brings with it new threats to journalism. Journalists are increasingly facing various forms of attacks ranging from doxing, account hacking and phishing to false impersonation and trolling.

These digital attacks not only threaten the privacy of journalists but also seriously damage their professional reputation and security. Faced with threats of online pressures, journalists often find themselves self-censored for fear of further attacks or retaliation.

Digital violence not only undermines freedom of expression, but also undermines the integrity of the journalistic profession, creating an atmosphere of insecurity and fear. Research into this phenomenon is becoming crucial for understanding the scope of the problem and developing adequate measures to protect journalists in the digital environment.

Chart 21. Have you personally been a victim of digital violence because of your journalistic work?, in %

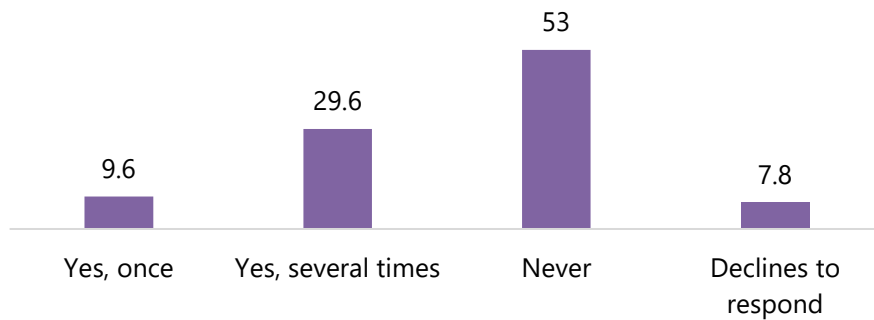
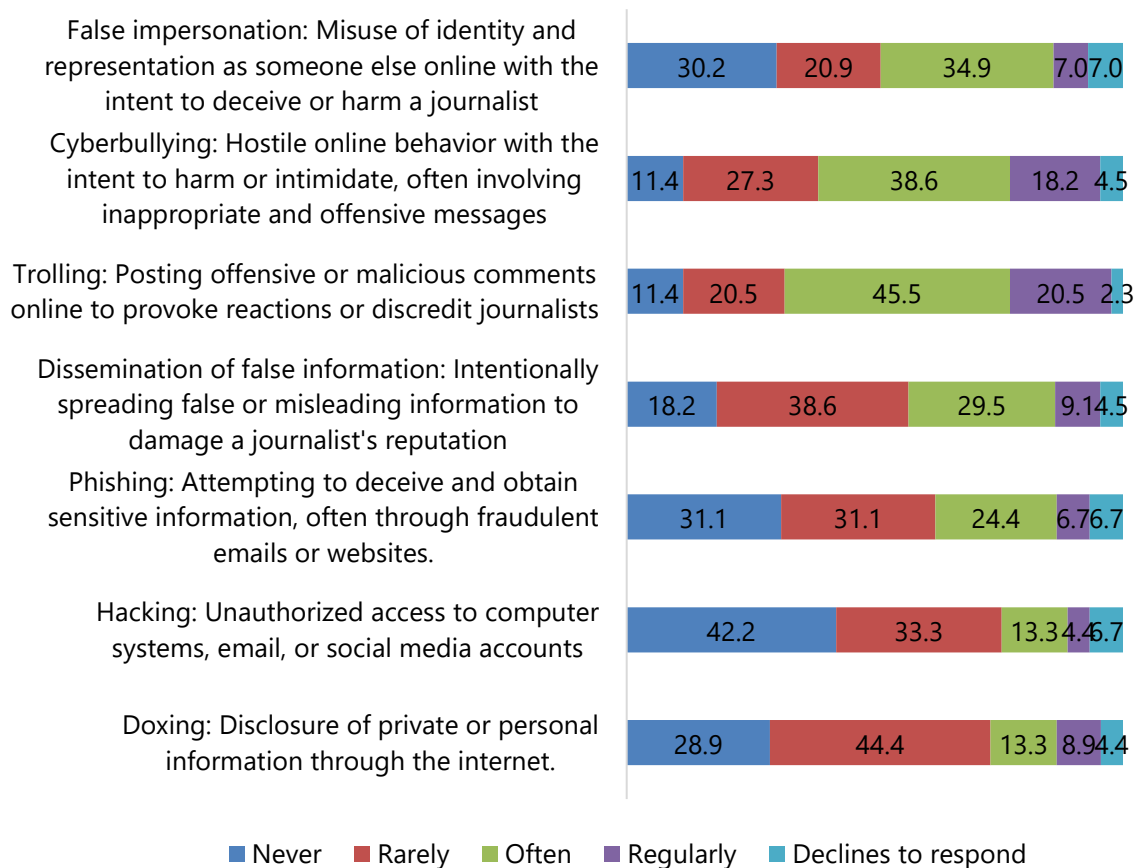


Chart 21 illustrates the distribution of responses to the inquiry on experiencing digital violence (online pressures and deceptions such as: doxing, hacking accounts and mail, phishing through fake e-mails or web addresses, sharing false information to damage your reputation, trolling, cyberbullying through inappropriate and threatening messages, misrepresentation in order to discredit you...), due to journalism. **A majority (53%) of journalists say they have never been a victim of digital violence, while an aggregate 39.2% say they have been a victim of digital violence (of which 9.6% once and 29.6% more times).** 7.8% of respondents declined to answer this question.

Chart 22. How often, as a journalist, have you encountered one of the following types of digital violence in the course of your work?, only those who experienced digital violence, in%



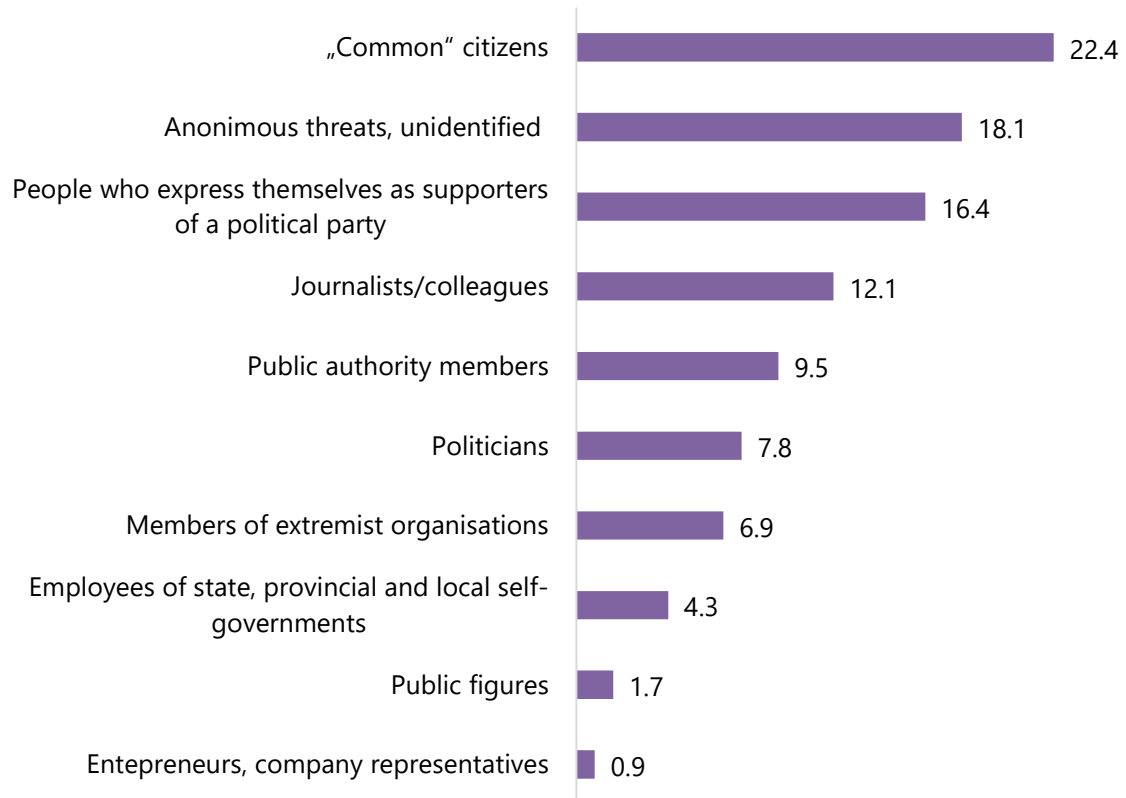
The most common forms of digital violence that journalists face in Serbia are trolling, cyberbullying and misrepresentation. Trolling and cyberbullying are more common forms that journalists experience more often or regularly, rather than rarely or never. In addition to false impersonation, **the sharing of false information, as well as phishing are forms of violence that every third journalist in Serbia experiences frequently or regularly, while hacking and doxing are the least represented forms of digital violence.**

Trolling (publishing offensive or malicious comments online to provoke reactions or discredit journalists) **is regularly or frequently experienced by 65.9% of journalists**, rarely 20.5%, and 11.4% of respondents never experienced this type of digital violence. **Cyberbullying** (hostile behaviour via the Internet with the intention of harming or intimidating, often with inappropriate and offensive messages) **is regularly or frequently perceived by 56.8% of journalists**, rarely 27.3%, and never experienced this type of digital violence 11.4% of respondents.

False impersonation (false use of identity and portrayal as someone else via the Internet with the intention of deceiving or harming a journalist) **is regularly or frequently experienced by 41.9% of journalists**, rarely 20.9%, and never experienced this type of digital violence 30.2% of respondents. The sharing of false information (the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information to damage the reputation of journalists) **is regularly or frequently experienced by 38.6% of journalists**, rarely by 38.6%, and never experienced this type of digital violence 18.2% of respondents. **Phishing** (an attempt to deceive into obtaining sensitive information, often through fake e-mails or websites) **is regularly or frequently experienced by 31.1% of journalists**, almost the same percentage rarely, and 31.1% of respondents have never experienced this type of digital violence.

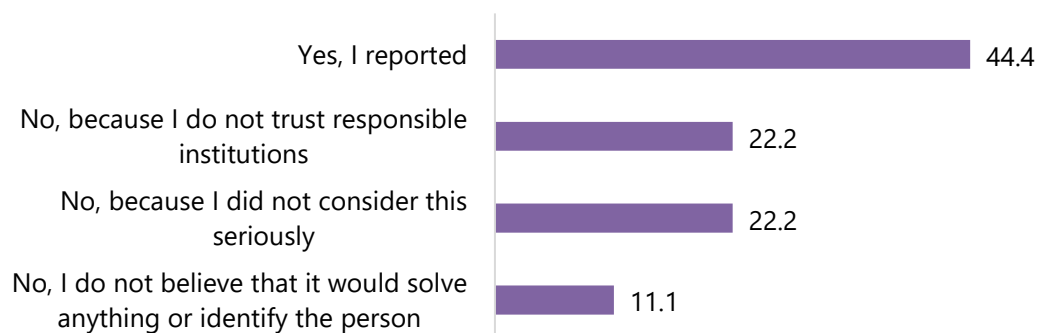
Doxing (disclosure of private or personal information via the Internet) is regularly or frequently experienced by 22.2% of journalists, and never or rarely by 73.3%. Hacking (unauthorised access to computer systems, emails or social media accounts) is regularly or frequently experienced by 17.8% of journalists, and never or rarely by 75.6%.

Chart 23. From whom have you experienced digital violence?, only those who indicated that they experienced digital violence in %



Journalists who have experienced digital violence say that it was most often directed by "ordinary" citizens (22.4%), or that it was anonymous threats (18.1%) and people expressing themselves as supporters of political parties (16.4%). Of the fellow journalists, 12.1% experienced some form of digital violence, 9.5% of public officials surveyed, 7.8% from politicians, 6.9% from members of extremist organisations, and 4.3% from employees of state administrations of journalists with experience of digital violence – Chart 23.

Chart 24. Did you report digital violence?, only those who stated that they experienced digital violence in %



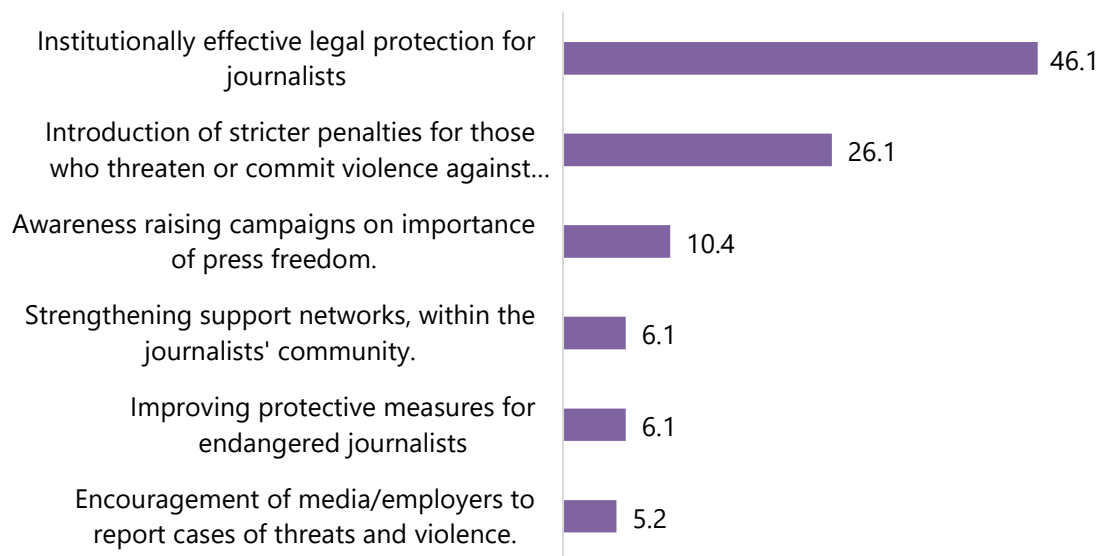
Among those who have experienced some form of digital violence, **44.4% of journalists reported this violence, while 55.6% did not report it**. As a reason for non-reporting, they equally singled out distrust in institutions dealing with it and non-understanding of violence seriously (22.2%) each. A doubt that this would be solved and the perpetrator discovered was the reason for not reporting for 11.1% of respondents. **The lack of time and knowledge on the correct address to report digital violence did not stand out at all as factors of non-reporting of digital violence.**

2 SUPPORT IN PROVIDING PROTECTION AND SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS

Exposure to threats and violence poses a serious challenge for journalists, whose professional activities are often impaired or even impeded. In such situations, support becomes essential to preserve journalistic integrity and freedom of expression. Journalists who experience threats often go through emotionally and psychologically challenging moments, faced with pressures that go beyond the boundaries of professional work. The support of the community, journalists' associations, institutions, and colleagues plays a key role in providing encouragement, solidarity and protection. Enabling journalists to share their experiences, providing legal assistance, and establishing a security system becomes essential in overcoming the negative consequences that threats and violence can have on their professional and personal lives.

Chart 25 presents the responses of journalists regarding the primary measures deemed crucial in supporting them when faced with threats and attacks, and in fostering an environment that encourages the reporting of such incidents.

Chart 25. In your opinion, what is the most important thing to do to support journalists in dealing with threats and attacks and to encourage them to report such incidents? In %



A convincing majority of journalists (46.1%) agreed that institutionally effective legal protection of journalists is necessary to support journalists in addressing threats and attacks and to

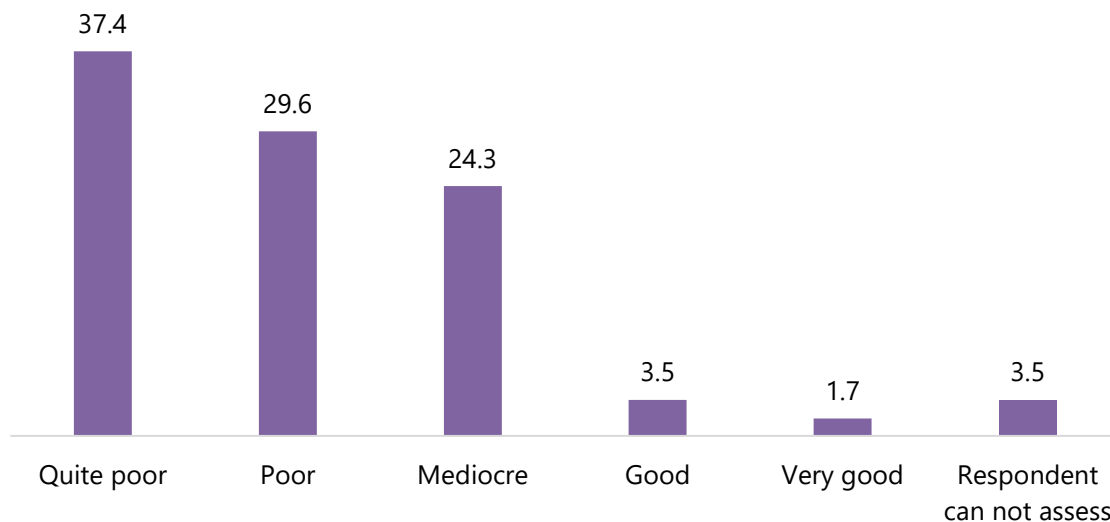
encourage them to report such incidents, one in four journalists (26.1%) believe that it is necessary to introduce stricter penalties for those who threaten or commit violence, and one in ten (10.4%) believe that a campaign to raise public awareness of the importance of media freedom is necessary.

The remaining respondents (6.1%) consider the work on strengthening the support network within the journalistic community and on measures of protection for journalists that are endangered, and 5.2% as the most important priority cites encouraging the media / employers to report threats and violence as important.

The overall level of safety and protection of journalists in Serbia is assessed by respondents as quite poor (37.4%) and poor (29.6%). Every fourth respondent (24.3%) believes that the safety and protection of journalists is mediocre, and jointly only 5.2% believe that safety and protection is good or very good.

In the event of threats and attacks due to reporting, respondents state that they would first contact their editor (26.1%) or the journalists' association to which they belong (21.7%).

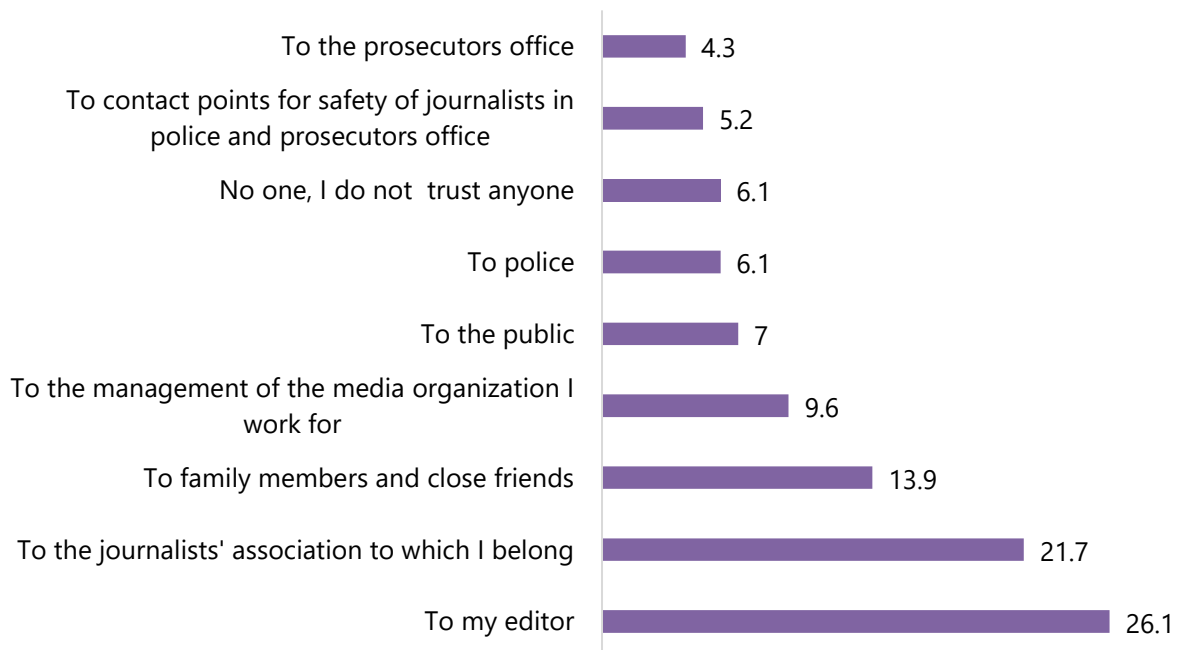
Chart 26. Based on your previous experience in the world of journalism, how would you rate the overall level of safety and protection of journalists in Serbia?, in %



Family members and close friends would be addressed by 13.9% of journalists in such cases, management 9.6%, the public 7%, police 6.1%, contact points for journalists' safety in the police and prosecutor's office 5.2%, and prosecutor's office 4.3% of respondents.

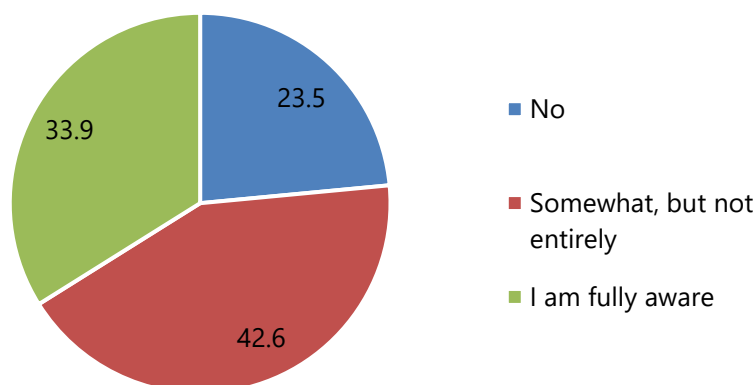
6.1% stated that they would not report to anyone due to lack of trust.

Chart 27. Who would you turn to first in case of threats or attacks on you for your reporting? in %



In the response regarding the reporting of threats, men journalists expressed that they would rather report to the journalists' association of which they are members, as well as their management. Women journalists articulate a preference to report to respective editors and confiding in family members or individuals within their close social milieu.

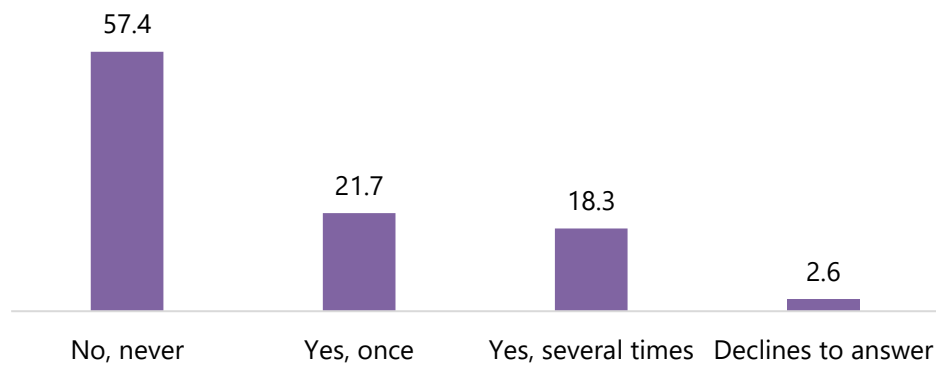
Chart 28. Are you familiar with the existing mechanisms concerning the safety of journalists (e.g. permanent working group for raising the level of journalists' safety) and the established system of contact points in the competent institutions?, in %



The previous finding should also be interpreted in accordance with the results that **only one in three journalists is fully aware of the existing mechanisms concerning the safety of journalists (e.g., te**

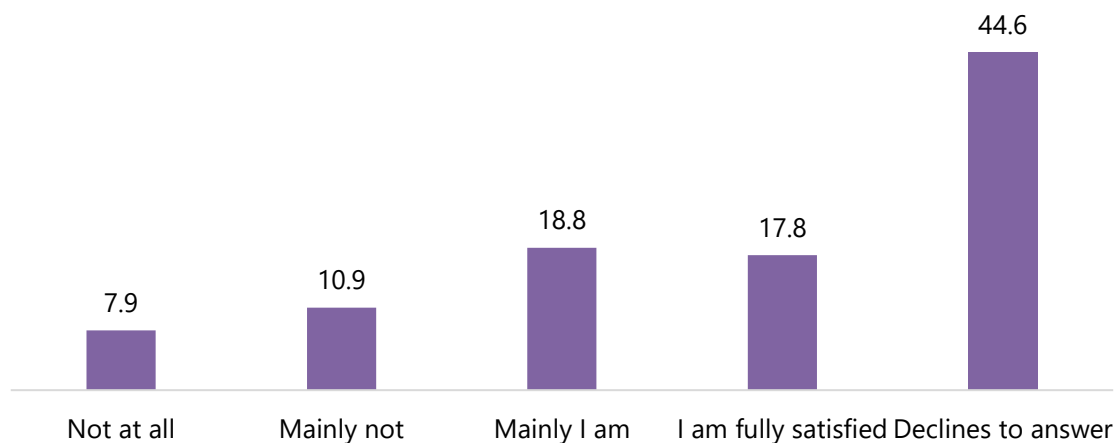
permanent working group for journalists' safety) and the established system of contact points in competent institutions (33.9%). To some extent, just over two-fifths of journalists are familiar with this system - 42.6%, and 23.5% admit that they are not familiar with the existing mechanisms.

Chart 29 Have you ever sought legal help and support from journalists' and media associations?, in %



A majority of journalists (57.4%) admit that they have never sought legal help and support from journalists' and media associations. Among those who sought help, 21.7% sought help once and 18.3% several times.

Chart 30. Were you generally satisfied with the legal aid/support you received?, in %



Finally, journalists were asked whether they were generally satisfied with the legal aid and support provided by journalists' associations – Chart 30.

Slightly more than a third of respondents who sought help were more or less satisfied with the legal aid and support they received (aggregate 36.6%, of which 17.8% were completely satisfied and 18.8% were mostly satisfied). On the other hand, a total of 18.8% of journalists who sought help are not satisfied (of which 7.9% are not satisfied at all, and 10.9% are mostly not satisfied). However, these data should be taken with caution because over two-fifths of respondents (44.6%) declined to answer this question.

3 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the presented research, it is possible to list the following recommendations for creating better conditions for journalistic work, preserving journalistic freedom and integrity, journalists' safety, as well as strengthening the trust of journalists in the work of institutions and community support.:

- *It is necessary to work on strengthening the legal protection of journalists:* In order to combat threats and violence, it is necessary to improve legal mechanisms and the system of support to journalists. Institutionally effective legal protection (i.e. improving existing laws on the protection of journalists from threats and violence) should be one of the priorities for providing support to journalists, with the introduction of stricter penalties for those who threaten or commit violence.
- *It is desirable to work on improving public awareness of the contemporary insecurity of the journalistic profession:* through activities (such as various campaigns and well-known journalists who would talk about this problem from a personal example) that promote media freedom and point out the importance and dangers facing the journalistic role.
- *It is necessary to work on informing journalists about the rights and mechanisms of protection:* Given that a significant number of journalists are not fully familiar with the existing protection mechanisms, it is necessary to work on informing journalists about their rights and available resources that can support them, through various campaigns, communication channels, journalist associations.
- *It is desirable to encourage the confidence of journalists in the positive outcome of reporting threats and violence:* examples of good practice, where journalists who have had experience reporting violence and a positive outcome will encourage their colleagues and support them to report threats and violence.
- *Improving security measures in the digital space:* Given the ubiquitous digital violence, it is important to implement and improve security mechanisms in the digital space in order to protect journalists from cyber threats and abuses, through cooperation with IT experts and organisations that provide support in preventing and responding to digital violence.

This research was produced with the financial support of the European Union and the Council of Europe, through the joint programme "Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye", within the action "Protecting freedom of expression and of the media in Serbia (PROFLEX)". Its contents are the sole responsibility of the authors. Views expressed herein can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the European Union or the Council of Europe.

The joint European Union and Council of Europe programme "Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye" is a co-operation initiative, running from 2023 until 2026. The programme covers actions in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye. It enables the Beneficiaries to meet their reform agendas in the fields of human rights, rule of law and democracy and to comply with European standards, which is also a priority for the EU enlargement process.*

The action "Protecting freedom of expression and of the media in Serbia (PROFLEX)", implemented under the Horizontal Facility programme, enables the beneficiary institutions and civil society organisations in Serbia to progress towards meeting their reform agendas in the field of freedom of expression and freedom of media, in line with the European standards. It aims at contributing to an improved environment for the exercise, in particular by journalists and media actors, of their rights of freedom of expression, in a more pluralistic and safer media environment, in line with the standards as set by in accordance with Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights.

**This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence*

ENG

The Member States of the European Union have decided to link together their know-how, resources and destinies. Together, they have built a zone of stability, democracy and sustainable development whilst maintaining cultural diversity, tolerance and individual freedoms. The European Union is committed to sharing its achievements and its values with countries and peoples beyond its borders.

www.europa.eu

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

www.coe.int

Co-funded
by the European Union



COUNCIL OF EUROPE



Co-funded and implemented
by the Council of Europe