



Laboratory

Memory and Media in the Western Balkans

Final Report

Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa, Centro per la Cooperazione
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This dossier is the result of the Laboratory "Memory and media in the Western Balkans" organized by the Master degree in Relazioni internazionali e Diplomazia of the University of Padova and Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa. The Laboratory involved students enrolled in the MA courses in Relazioni internazionali e diplomazia; Human Rights and Multilevel Governance; European and Global Studies.

The 12hrs Lab aimed at providing important insights on the everyday tasks of experts working for the think-tank Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT) at the Centro per la Cooperazione Internazionale (CCI) in Trento (Italy). The Lab was organized by Professor Benedetto Zaccaria (University of Padova), Marco Abram, and Serena Epis (OBCT-CCI).

The Lab was dedicated to memory and media, two of the most relevant issues in the current analysis of politics and society in Southeast Europe. Students were provided with theoretical and practical tools and were required to test them by analyzing specific case studies from various perspectives and with different approaches.

The first part of the course provided a theoretical introduction to the public and collective memory of some of the events that marked the history of Southeast Europe in the 1990s. The second part focused on specific case studies of journalists who, due to their reporting of such events, were targets of threats and intimidation.

Students' contributions are organized in chapters devoted to four relevant case studies from three post-Yugoslav countries.

The texts have been reviewed by Marco Abram, senior researcher, and Serena Epis, researcher at OBCT-CCI and lecturers of the laboratory. The analyses, opinions and conclusions expressed in the individual contributions belong exclusively to the students and do not necessarily reflect the official views or policy guidelines of OBCT-CCI.

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Silencing the Past to Control the Present: Media Freedom, Memory Politics, and the Case of Dinko Gruhonjić in Serbia

Nicole Eckert, Gemma Grasselli and Costanza Pampena

Media freedom in Serbia is currently at stake. Despite the guarantees provided by a solid legal framework, journalists' freedom of action is severely undermined. Amid ongoing student protests, this hostile environment has reached a new peak. Since November 2024, following the tragic collapse of a concrete canopy in the Novi Sad train station that killed 16 people, students across Serbia have taken to the streets in protests against government negligence and corruption.¹ In 2025, 208 press freedom incidents were recorded by relevant organizations, and Serbia ranks 96th worldwide on the Reporters Without Borders' Media Freedom Index, illustrating persistent challenges.²

One of the professionals who has been targeted for his activism, commitment to media freedom, and public opinion on issues related to the Yugoslav wars and the Srebrenica genocide is Professor Dinko Gruhonjić. During a recent interview with the authors, Gruhonjić discussed his experiences being targeted by right-wing extremists, emphasising that threats and harassment are not new experiences for him. Since the 1990s, his academic and journalistic work has focused on taboo topics in Serbian society, including dealing with the past, reconciliation, and facing responsibility for war crimes, which has often placed a target on his back.³ However, in March 2024, a deepfake video was released depicting him as a supporter of Dinko Šakić, a Croatian Ustaše official who was found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity during World War II. Since then, the professor has faced increased verbal harassment, smears, and death threats.⁴ The deepfake video acted as a trigger, a piece of fabricated evidence that opened the door for a wider, social form of oppression against the professor and empowered hate networks to organize more openly. This dynamic thrives within Serbia's culture of impunity for violence against journalists,⁵ a context Dinko Gruhonjić highlights when analyzing the weaponization of deepfakes. "When political actors and

¹ Associated Press (2026), Thousands rally in Serbia as students vow to continue fight against corruption

² [Press freedom in Serbia 2025](#), Reporters Without Borders

³ Dinko Gruhonjić, interview by Nicole Eckert, Gemma Grasselli, and Costanza Pampena, December 10, 2025

⁴ Gruhonjić (2025)

⁵ ECPMF (2025)

state media amplify this fabricated content”, he says, “it becomes a mechanism for mass targeting - a form of societal punishment that normalizes media as a tool to silence dissent in authoritarian societies”.⁶ The campaign intentionally extended to Gruhonjić’s family, colleagues, and students to increase pressure and create a climate of fear.

Within the Serbian legal system, freedom of the press and freedom of expression are recognised and protected by various provisions. Defined as constitutional rights in articles 46, 50, and 51, they are codified in the Law on Public Information and Media, the Law on Electronic Media, and the Law on Public Service Broadcasting. Between 2023 and 2025, media regulations underwent amendments that, rather than enhancing independence and transparency, highlighted government involvement in limiting such guarantees.

Alongside solid media regulations, journalists operate in a very fragile environment in which poor implementation of the law is backed by a lack of transparency from public authorities and by widely disseminated political pressure, both on public and private media outlets. These institutional issues, together with concrete threats against journalists and insufficient state protection, lead to severe consequences. As the government itself is involved in a high number of attacks, whether online or in public declarations, instead of condemning the situation, it creates an “inflammatory atmosphere” that serves as a “terrain for attacks”.⁷ For instance, 14 cases of SLAPPs were reported in 2025,⁸ the pro-government Association of Journalists of Serbia launched a smear campaign against the Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia and 12 incidents involving 30 journalists were perpetrated by police or state security between January and June 2025.⁹ A widespread deterioration of media workers’ safety conditions, of violence and of political pressure by the government have been highlighted since the start of the Novi Sad protests in November 2024.

A key aspect, as directly experienced by Dinko Gruhonjić, concerns journalists' safety. In fact, Serbian legislation, while providing a framework of protection at the legal and institutional levels, does not address the physical level. Although the Standing Working

⁶ Gruhonjić (2025)

⁷ Đurić, R. (2024), *Serbia. Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and Journalists’ Safety Index 2024*, Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia, 46

⁸ According to Serbia SLAPP database <https://slapp.rs/en/slapp-db/>

⁹ Media Freedom Rapid Response (2025), *Mapping Media Freedom, Monitoring Report January-June 2025*, 19

Group for the Protection of Journalists was created in 2017, it has not yet established effective mechanisms to physically protect journalists. As reported by Gruhonjić, despite receiving many death threats, he did not receive any support from the state and had to resort to national and international journalists' solidarity, to international donors and to a private security company.

Such legal backsliding has also been highlighted by the European Commission in its *2025 Serbia Report*, which urges Serbia to effectively implement media legislation in accordance with the EU legal framework and to develop and enhance protection of journalists. With freedom of expression being a structural condition for EU accession, its "constrained" environment and the "chilling effect"¹⁰ of state authority declarations, as stated by the Commission, have further delayed Serbia's path to the European Union, thus fostering the already widespread "fatigue and skepticism"¹¹ across public opinion and urging for a substantial shift in its policies.

In a more encouraging light, journalists' associations and civil society organisations, such as SafeJournalist Network (SJNI) in Serbia, have been working to fill the institutional gap in media freedom. As stressed by Gruhonjić, they provide fertile ground for countering political oppression and effectively implement the freedoms guaranteed by Serbia's legal framework. Notwithstanding their efforts, it is clear that without full political support, their actions are impactful but limited, and their role underscores how deeply the institutional system falls short in protecting journalists, academics, students, and activists.

The condition of press freedom in Serbia is also linked to the political use of memory and memory politics in the country. The case of Professor Dinko Gruhonjić's public targeting is a case in point, as in 2023 he became a target because of his his statements on the past of the Serbian nation and its actions during the World War II and the 1990s wars, in which he denounced Serbia's responsibility for war crimes, thus going against the regime's main narrative of a victimised country.¹² What made Gruhonjić's affirmations despised by the government is that they report some events about the

¹⁰ European Commission (2025), *Commission Staff Working Document. Serbia 2025 Report*

¹¹ Gruhonjić (2025)

¹² VREME (July 18, 2023) NDNV: Condemnation of the attack on Dinko Gruhonjić; Radiosarajevo.ba (July 18, 2023) NDNV: Dinko Gruhonjić is the target of an attack from the BiH entity RS because of his statement about the genocide in Srebrenica

1990s wars in which the Serbian nation committed war crimes and ethnic cleansing. That caused him to be targeted by a part of the Serbian society and by the government, which depicts him as an enemy of the State violating the nation's honour. Indeed, since the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power in 2012, the use of memory of World War II and the 1990s wars changed, and the country adopted a revisionist memory policy under the populist influence of the government. The State-sponsored narrative of memory is based on the systematic denial of the crimes committed and the exclusion of non-Serb points of view, presenting a predominant nationalist narrative adopting the frame of human rights memorialization, through the remembrance of glorious citizens and victims to deal with the past.¹³ The memory politics indeed focus on the dichotomy between the heroic gestures in the fight to defend the Serbian nation and the victimization of the country and its soldiers in the 1990s wars.¹⁴ The victimhood narratives also exist in relation to the international community's accusations: for instance, the Serbian government did not welcome the UN General Assembly resolution on declaring July 11th "International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica" and adopted a parallel campaign with videos and the slogan "We are not a genocidal people" on Belgrade's main buildings.¹⁵

The industry of memory in Serbia encompasses a variety of sectors, from museums to educational programs in schools, from textbooks to the hosting of convicted war criminals to share their witness, public holidays and commemorative celebrations, in which the military apparatus has a central role, to exhibitions and documentaries broadcast live via television and radio to reach the audience¹⁶. The industry of memory also systematically prevents critical or oppositional narration from spreading through society, and lately, this has become dangerous for those actively mobilized or working to diffuse a different narrative about the 1990s wars. Nonetheless, there is a significant and growing effort by memory activists and anti-national actors that propose and defend a facts-based version of the past in opposition to the regime's narrative. Anti-war and anti-nationalist groups (just to name a few: the *Women in Black*, the *Youth Initiative for*

¹³ Humanitarian Law Center (2021), *Memory Politics of the 1990s Wars in Serbia: historical revisionism and challenges of memory activism*.

¹⁴ Ivi, pp. 32-33

¹⁵ Moratti, M. (July 11, 2025), *30 years after: Serbia in denial about genocide*, Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa

¹⁶ The "industry of memory" refers to the general mechanism of memory distribution in a country, from its ideological elements to its financial conditions (Humanitarian Law Center, 2021, p. 26)

Human Rights, and the *Four Faces of Omarska*) are active in civil society and carry forward nonviolent “mnemonic battles”.¹⁷ These activities and groups continue to contest the main narrative and face strong opposition for their attempts to “break the silence” on forgotten events.¹⁸ An example of this is the alternative civic calendar gradually shaped by this work, which reports new days of remembrance distinct from the official calendar, such as the annual 11th July commemoration of the Srebrenica Genocide.¹⁹

In the aforementioned case of Dinko Gruhonjić, attacks on his public statements and the deepfake video tactic undermined a critical arena in the struggle over memory: the academic sphere, where critical thinking about the past is essential but is made “incompatible with the principles of academic life”.²⁰ The whole situation shows how the media environment can be not only dysfunctional but deliberately designed to obscure accountability, delegitimize critics, and prevent society from confronting the past or understanding the present. The deepfake campaigns, the threats, and the narrative of memory politics become, in this way, not accidental factors but core tools of political control. Thus, memory politics in Serbia is not simply about the past: it is a political technology used to set the boundaries of who has the right to speak about the past and in what terms. But, as Gruhonjić reports, “when the past cannot be examined honestly, the present cannot be governed democratically”.²¹

Serbian society’s mobilization over the last two years is a matter of interest. Recent student protests, coming from different sources, may represent a powerful challenge to the State’s dominant political narrative. In commenting on the ongoing protests, the professor describes a generation that is morally grounded, digitally literate, and capable of independent judgment and collective activism. He emphasizes that “these protests suggest that young people are engaging with political reality, that they are not passive, that apathy is not an acceptable choice”.²² These students are actively questioning State narratives, building networks of trust outside the dominant framework, and expanding spaces for critical engagement, which can be seen as a major generational shift, offering

¹⁷ Fridman, O. (2014) *Alternative calendars and memory work in Serbia: Anti-war activism after Milošević*, *Memory Studies*, 8(2), 212 –226

¹⁸ *Ibidem*

¹⁹ *Ibidem*

²⁰ Gruhonjić (2025); Petar Grujic (1998), *Serbia's universities come under attack*, *Nature* 394

²¹ Gruhonjić (2025)

²² Gruhonjić (2025)

hope for the future amid long-standing nationalist and authoritarian control over history.

The situation in Serbia cannot be fully understood by looking at individual incidents in isolation: the harassments of journalists, the pressure of students, the manipulation of media narratives and the political instrumentalization of memory are all interconnected parts of a single ecosystem. This deep-rooted issue of historical memory and its connection to national governance explains how the crisis in Serbia is not only political but also linked to the dimensions of narrative, truth, and memory. The case of Dinko Gruhonjić highlights the significant challenges faced by independent media in Serbia: the diffusion of dissenting, non-controlled information and different versions of historical events, and the push for reconciliation through a critical approach to the past is still strongly contested. However, the analysis leaves space for hopeful considerations: indeed, there is a remarkably resilient sector of Serbian civil society organizations that consistently works to advocate at both national and international levels, publicly challenging the narratives used to justify attacks on dissenting citizens, even under constant political pressure, financial uncertainty, and smear campaigns. Students are mobilizing, independent media continue to investigate, civil society organizations refuse to retreat, and individuals support one another, even under enormous pressure. That resilience, states Gruhonjić, provides a sense of community and protection and embodies the foundation for spaces of bottom-up solidarity and future democratic renewals.

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VREME (July 18, 2023), *NDNV: Condemnation of the attack on Dinko Gruhonjić*

ONLINE RESOURCES

Associated

Press

<https://apnews.com/article/serbia-student-protest-vucic-f3b3ed6f41b745f3cb54ac034f21649b>

European Center for Press & Media Freedom

<https://www.ecpmf.eu/serbia-one-year-of-unpunished-attacks-on-journalist-dinko-gruhonjic-the-culture-of-impunity-must-end/>

Mapping Media Freedom Alert Explorer <https://www.mappingmediafreedom.org/>

Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index <https://rsf.org/en/index>

Serbia's SLAPP database <https://slapp.rs/en>

Memory issues and media freedom : The case of Srđan Šušnica in Bosnia & Herzegovina

Bruno Daniele Libardo, María Elena Aguirre Ortíz, Riccardo Maiutto

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina left the country and the people with deep scars, from sieges to mass killings and ethnic cleansing. This, on top of massive displacement, and long-term political division. Memory of the war though is not unified: there are multiple, often competing narratives about who were the victims, who were the perpetrators, what the root causes were, what the outcome meant, and how societies should remember all that happened. Scholars note that memory in Bosnia and Herzegovina is hugely divided on political and institutional levels.²³ This division has 3 central narratives, each in direct relation to one of the main ethnicities recognized in the country: Bosniak connected to the state but includes only one ethnonational group; Bosnian Serbs the nation-building process of the Republika Srpska seen as a state of its own; Bosnian Croats associated with the nationalism of Croat leaders.²⁴ Beyond these 3 previously mentioned nation-building narratives, here is a fourth narrative, that represent the civic, or what Anida Sokol calls the “unconstituent”²⁵ narrative, which while being rare and marginal is based on civic-state identification.

People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the individual level, show a tendency to follow the dominant narrative of their own group, yet, when challenged on these viewpoints, they may also admit that other narratives and different truths may exist. Their governments, on the other hand, present a memory of institutionalization that is rigidly opposed between factions.²⁶ Education is a big issue in the expansion of these contrasting narratives, for many years, following the recommendations of the Council of Europe in 2000 the topic was excluded from school curricula until historians from all communities could develop a common approach. This changed in 2018 when Sarajevo’s Education

²³ Andersen, Tea Sindbæk. "War Memory in Bosnia–Herzegovina between Public and Private: Memory Conflicts and Memory Grey Zones." *Memory Studies* 15, no. 4 (2022): 1517–1531. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/17506980221102422>.

²⁴ Anida Sokol. "War Monuments: Instruments of Nation-building in Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Croatian Political Science Review* 51, no. 5 (2014): 105–126.

²⁵ Anida Sokol. "War Monuments" Pp. 119-121

²⁶ Vjeran Pavlaković, "Symbols and the Culture of Memory in Republika Srpska Krajina," *Nationalities Papers* 41, no. 6 (2013): 893–909, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2012.743511>.

Ministry abandoned the Council of Europe's recommendation. Other parts of the country eventually followed suit, and textbooks used across Bosnia and Herzegovina began to provide more detail about the war with a clear ethnic bias.²⁷

The textbooks used in Bosnia and Herzegovina promote separate, exclusive national identities: Bosniak, Croatian and Serbian.²⁸ Education is not the only visible mark of this division: statues, museums, cemeteries, plaques and graffiti are prominently displayed to commemorate the war of the Nineties. Soon after the conflict ended, each of the three former warring sides began constructing separate memorials to mark their losses. The virtual omnipresence of historical markers is a testament to the success of these endeavors. But they were guided by distinct nationalist ambitions: through their design, most memorials immediately signal who was responsible for their creation and which ethnic group they serve to represent.²⁹

Bosnian Serb narrative

For this ethnic group, the emphasis is mainly on Serb suffering: Serb civilians killed during the war, Serb soldiers or entities portrayed as defenders of their people.³⁰ Contested and conflicted narratives are present, regarding major atrocities, using denial, minimization and reframing narratives of events, as expressed by President of Serbia Tomislav Nikolić "There was no genocide Srebrenica"³¹. Education, political institutions, memorialization in Republika Srpska frequently reflect a Serb-centric interpretation of the war, with persistent strong aspirations for unification with the neighbor Serbia.³²

In the Republic of Srpska there is a narrative that motivates a sense of discrimination product of the Bosniaks-Croats alliance with the United States, reinforced by the

²⁷ Ljiljana Radonić, "War on Memory: Museums and Memorials in Croatia and Bosnia 30 Years after the Yugoslav Wars," *Ethik und Militär*, no. 1 (2025), <https://www.ethikundmilitaer.de/en/magazine-datenbank/detail/01-2025/article/war-on-memory-museums-and-memorials-in-croatia-and-bosnia-30-years-after-the-yugoslav-wars>.

²⁸ Alenka Bartulovic, "Nationalism in the Classroom: Narratives of the War in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995) in the History Textbooks of the Republic of Srpska," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 6, no. 3 (2006): 51-72.

²⁹ Vjeran Pavlaković, "Symbols and the Culture of Memory in Republika Srpska Krajina," *Nationalities Papers* 41, no. 6 (2013): 893-909, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2012.743511>.

³⁰ *Their people*: referencing only the Bosnian Serbs living in Bosnia & Herzegovina at the time of the war.

³¹ President of Serbia from May 2012 to May 2017, the statement was promptly rejected by the European Commission with a direct warning against any attempt to rewrite history

³² Sonja Biserko. "The Srebrenica Genocide: Serbia in Denial." *Pakistan Horizon* 65, no. 3 (2012): 1-6. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24711409>.

persecution of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Still, the presence of “parallel histories” is an important problem to solve³³. Students in Republika Srpska learn a version of the war that omits or minimizes the Srebrenica genocide or describes it differently. In the schools of Banja Luka, convicted war criminals are presented as key figures in the enclave’s military and political history, and they are equated with heroes.³⁴ For Bosniaks and many international observers, this narrative reflects denial which creates major obstacles to reconciliation.³⁵

Bosnian Muslim narrative

On the other hand, this second ethnic group puts a strong emphasis on the suffering of Bosniak civilians: mass killings, the genocide in Srebrenica in July 1995, ethnic cleansing, and the lack of adequate international intervention. In the words of Amnesty International “While many perpetrators have been brought to justice, the anniversary is a painful reminder that nearly 1,000 people presumed killed in Srebrenica in 1995 are still missing. Their families continue to live without answers, unable to lay their loved ones to rest or gain any real sense of closure.”³⁶ The memory revolves around protecting the truth, justice, recognition of crimes, memorialization of victims, and how accountability protects the dignity of survivors.³⁷

Actions by Bosniaks, as this particular ethnic group is called, include strong advocacy for a shared national memory which recognizes the harm done, also often pointing to exclusion and denial in other narratives. Projects like Bitter Land look for the

³³ Nicolas Moll. "Fragmented Memories in a Fragmented Country: Memory Competition and Political Identity-Building in Today's Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Nationalities Papers* 41, no. 6 (2013): 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2013.768220>.

³⁴ Tatjana Dordevic and Joshua Evangelista, “Srebrenica, 30 Years Later: The Battle for Memory in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” *New Lines Magazine*, July 18, 2025, <https://newlinesmag.com/essays/srebrenica-30-years-later-the-battle-for-memory-in-bosnia-herzegovina/>.

³⁵ Alenka Bartulovic, "Nationalism in the Classroom: Narratives of the War in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995) in the History Textbooks of the Republic of Srpska," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 6, no. 3 (2006): 51-72, <https://doi.org/10.12775/HiP.2023.031>

³⁶ Amnesty International. "Bosnia and Herzegovina: 30th Anniversary of Srebrenica massacre ‘a painful reminder from history.’" *Amnesty International News*, July 10, 2025. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/07/bosnia-and-herzegovina-30th-anniversary-of-srebrenica-massacre-a-painful-reminder-from-history/>.

³⁷ UNRIC. "30 Years After Srebrenica: Why Memory Still Matters." July 10, 2025. <https://unric.org/en/30-years-after-srebrenica-why-memory-still-matters/>.

acknowledgment of places of suffering and formal identification of the mass graves.³⁸ For many Bosniaks, the Srebrenica genocide is not just a local atrocity but a central symbol of the war's worst crimes and of failure of the international community. To this day, Srebrenica remains a looming shadow over the Bosniaks. Their current narrative expresses that recognition is still incomplete, as shown by the return of refugees, unsolved cases, and the fact that many people remain missing.³⁹ On top of that there's also the persistence of denial or minimization of Bosniak victims by other groups like in Republika Srpska.⁴⁰

Bosnian Croat narrative

The Bosnian Croat group is smaller in size in comparison to Bosniaks and Serbs. Bosnian Croats have their own memories of wartime suffering: attacks on Croat civilians, displacement, loss of property. Their narrative sometimes intersects with the Bosniak narrative, as allies in certain fronts, but also has distinct parts, especially where Croat-Bosniak conflict occurred, where crimes or violence committed by Bosnian Croats is omitted or minimized. At the same time, Croat victims and wartime tragedies may be less prominent and visible in national public memory, especially when contending with the 2 most contrasting narratives, but are nonetheless important locally.⁴¹ Challenges for reconciliation with Bosnian Croats include narratives of feeling marginalized in the national discourse, which often emphasizes Bosniak victimhood or the Serb nationalistic narrative. Also, where Croat-Bosniak conflict occurred, for example in central Bosnia, memory is mixed and localized rather than centrally recognized in the

³⁸ Marinko Banjac, "Between Commemoration and Reconciliation: Memory Activism in Post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Memory Studies* (2024): 798 - 814, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980241270857>.

³⁹ Fischer, Martina, Bernardo Arévalo de León, Carlos Martín Beristain, et al. "'Dealing with the Past' in Bosnia - Obstacles and Challenges for 'Reconciliation' in the Region of Former Yugoslavia." In *Dealing with the Past in Post-Conflict Societies: Ten Years after the Peace Accords in Guatemala and Bosnia - Herzegovina: Swisspeace Annual Conference 2006*, edited by Jonathan Sisson. Swisspeace, 2007. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11082.7>.

⁴⁰ Julia Masur. "No Room for Denial?": Historical Memory and the 1995 Genocide at Srebrenica. 2019, 1-36. Student Research and Creative Works. University of Puget Sound. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.36514060>.

⁴¹ Cemre Aydoğan, "Nationalism and Collective Memory: A Qualitative Analysis of Yugo-Nostalgia and Trauma in Bosnia-Herzegovina" (PhD diss., Sapienza University of Rome, 2022), 90-103

national story. Croat perspective is sometimes overshadowed or less visible internationally, making advocacy for recognition more difficult.⁴²

Unconstituent or Civic Narrative

This perspective is part of the multilayered memory landscape in the country, but it departs from the ethnical dimension of the war. The Bosnian civic nation (the one represented by this narrative) while highly discussed is rejected by both Serbs and Croats as well as dismissed by the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina; there is some overlapping in identity with the Bosniaks nation, but their members rarely define themselves in relation to the State. The distinction between the defining terms is not always clear; Bosniaks sometimes use the term Bosnian in the ethnic sense, thus differentiating themselves from Serbs and Croats in the country. For these last ones, however, the term Bosnian almost always refers to Bosnian Muslims. Even if this perspective remains ignored by most of the population there is a growing tendency, mainly with young people who do not feel they belong to any of the defined ethnic groups, to refuse the continuous ethno-national narratives. Thus, the civic narrative has risen as a counter-vision of the past creating a more inclusive memory of the war and, overall, a form of protest against the ethnic regimes and the leading political parties of their respective groups.⁴³

Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression in Bosnia-Herzegovina

The Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index report on Bosnia and Herzegovina establishes that press freedom and the quality of journalism is not uniform across the country. Public-interest journalism in Republika Srpska is challenged by the recriminalisation of defamation and the rising influence of Russian propaganda.⁴⁴ The Mapping Media Freedom also reports further damage to media freedom in the Republika Srpska with the passing of the "foreign agents" law on September 2023, formally known as the Special Register and Publicity of the Work of Nonprofit

⁴² Nicolas Moll. "Fragmented Memories in a Fragmented Country: Memory Competition and Political Identity-Building in Today's Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Nationalities Papers* 41, no. 6 (2013): 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2013.768220>.

⁴³ Anida Sokol. "War Monuments: Instruments of Nation-building in Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Croatian Political Science Review* 51, no. 5 (2014): 105-126.

⁴⁴ Reporters Without Borders, "Bosnia-Herzegovina," accessed March 15, 2026, <https://rsf.org/en/country/bosnia-herzegovina>.

Organizations law. The law regulates the function and activities of NGOs who receive foreign funding and subjects them to special registration and periodic reporting requirements.⁴⁵

An analysis of the European Commission's Country report on Bosnia and Herzegovina⁴⁶ shows the following findings on media freedom and freedom of expression. According to the Commission, no progress was achieved in 2025 in guaranteeing freedom of expression and of the media, and the protection of journalists. The country continues to experience deep stagnation in media freedom, and even signs of deterioration, with a lack of financial sustainability for public broadcasters. This last point is key to ensure stable, independent public service media capable of fulfilling core obligations related to media pluralism, digital transformation, and democratic accountability,

The report highlights how the advertising practices of public companies such as Telecom and advertising agencies linked to political parties continue to harm media integrity. Local broadcasters funded by cantonal and municipal authorities remain subject to political pressure and influence. Online platforms continue to be used to spread hate speech and disinformation, as self-regulation of online media has a limited effect. Criminal prosecution remains limited to cases of incitement of religious and ethnic hatred online. Journalism remains a precarious profession, with low wages or job security. The situation is even worse for women journalists. Compliance with the Press and Online Media Council's media code remains inconsistent. The sudden closure of Al Jazeera Balkans in July 2025 left some 200 journalists without a job.

As a result, the Commission provided a series of recommendations, some just emphasizing last year's, which were not implemented and remain valid. Bosnia and Herzegovina should focus on ensuring the protection of journalists and systematic institutional follow-up to threats and violence against them; ensure the financial sustainability and political independence of public broadcasters and harmonize all regional legislation with the State-level Law on the public broadcasting system; adopt legislation on both transparency in media ownership and criteria for public advertising;

⁴⁵ Media Anthropology Center for Culture and Media, "Monitoring and Advocacy: Alert 31076," accessed March 15, 2026, <https://www.mapmf.org/alert/31076>.

⁴⁶ European Commission, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025 Report, Commission Staff Working Document SWD(2025) 751 final (Brussels, November 4, 2025).

and ensure that defamation is decriminalised across the country and finally ensure the protection of journalists and systematic institutional follow-up to threats and violence against them.⁴⁷

Safety of journalism: Case Study: Srđan Šušnica

Srđan Šušnica is a cultural studies expert, he was born in Banja Luka in 1976 and graduated from the Police Academy in Belgrade to then finish a law degree. He got his Masters in Cultural Studies at the University of Ljubljana and his work focuses on cultural research of Bosnian and Balkan themes. He's done social activism thought his about remembrance, historical revisionism, nationalism, and fascism. Until 2019 he worked as a Cultural Study researcher in Banja Luka, the capital of the Republika Srpska.⁴⁸ In order to offer clarity about Šušnica's situation and the reasons behind it, is necessary to delved into information from local and regional news combine with his own publications and comments in debates and presentations he was invited to between 2015 and 2020.

Problems for Šušnica began in 2015, when he published the article Banja Luka: the City of Oblivion and Disdain.⁴⁹ The essay is very personal in many ways, he takes the reader on a historical tour of his own childhood explaining his understanding of the context he was living in while he describes core issues of that existence. In a more detail description of its content, the essay is an analysis of Banja Luka's urban landscape transformation through the years, an argument on how the post-war authorities of Republika Srpska have intentionally erased the city's multicultural heritage and the traces of the ethnic cleansing committed in the war in order to construct an ethnic Serbian identity. Making an examination of the destruction of local landmarks and the selective memory of the past, Šušnica explains how, sadly, the city he grew up in has become a tool designed to enforce a particular narrative that rewrites the past and marginalizes the memory of its non-Serb population.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ European Commission, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025 Report, Commission Staff Working Document SWD(2025) 751 final (Brussels, November 4, 2025), 15.

⁴⁸ Srđan Šušnica, "Srđan Šušnica," Balkanist, accessed March 10, 2026, <https://balkanist.net/author/srdjan-susnica/>.

⁴⁹ Srđan Šušnica. "Banja Luka: The City of Oblivion and Disdain." Balkanist, July 24, 2015. <https://balkanist.net/banja-luka-amnesia/>.

⁵⁰ Srđan Šušnica, "Banja Luka: The City of Oblivion and Disdain"

After his essay he continued to challenge the carefully constructed reality built by the Government of Republika Srpska. In the same 2015, during a conference cycle in a panel dedicated to the Documentary Statement 710399 Šušnica declared that “the creation of the Republika Srpska is a political reward for the genocide, since there are neither historical nor cultural reasons to justify its creation.”⁵¹ He continued his criticism of his city treatment to multiethnicity stating that “a million people now living in this Bosnia-Herzegovina entity live in the legal, political and cultural legacy of the genocide as well as the culturcide that had been happening since the beginning of the war. This culturcide involves deleting everything non-Serbian. The citizens are under constant indoctrination that pressures them to forget that Bosniaks ever lived on this territory.”⁵² It is quite present in the way he speaks that for Šušnica the struggle in Republika Srpska is far from over.

Three years later, in 2018, Šušnica once again publicly criticized Republika Srpska’s political leadership, this time around the celebration of 9 January (the RS “Day”), calling it a “statement of political will”⁵³ tied to nationalism. Above all, he declares “celebrating January 9 is digging into the living wounds of the families of over 30,000 civilian victims of war crimes and genocide, mostly Bosniaks, Bosnians and Herzegovinians, Bosnian Muslims, which were committed by the armed forces of the Republic of Srpska, says Srđan Šušnica.”⁵⁴ The 9th of January is a holiday that marks the day in 1992 when Bosnian Serbs leaders declared the foundation of Republika Srpska, but for many others it’s also the beginning of the war that led to genocide. It is also important to know that this holiday has been declared illegal and unconstitutional by two rulings by Bosnia’s

⁵¹ Srđan Šušnica, "The Debate on Srebrenica: Recognition Is Necessary for Reconciliation," Humanitarian Law Center, July 14, 2015, <https://www.hlc-rdc.org/en/public-information/news/the-debate-on-srebrenica-recognition-is-necessary-for-reconciliation/>.

⁵² Humanitarian Law Center, "The Debate on Srebrenica: Recognition Is Necessary for Reconciliation," accessed March 10, 2026, <https://www.hlc-rdc.org/en/public-information/news/the-debate-on-srebrenica-recognition-is-necessary-for-reconciliation/>.

⁵³ Srđan Šušnica, "INTERVJU Srđan Šušnica za Danas: Suština 9. januara stane u masovnu grobnicu, u odnosu na Kurtija, Vučić je odlazeća politička figura," interview by Ivana Šundić Mihovilović, Danas, January 9, 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/svet/region/intervju-srdjan-susnica-za-danas-sustina-9-januara-stane-u-masovnu-grobnicu-u-odnosu-na-kurtija-vucic-je-odlazeca-politicka-figura/>.

⁵⁴ Šušnica, "INTERVJU Srđan Šušnica za Danas.

state-level Constitutional Court.⁵⁵ Later on the same year Šušnica also accused the RS Ministry of Internal Affairs (MUP RS) of abusing power towards its Serbian population by stating that “MUP RS today beats and kills Serbs, because it has largely exterminated non-Serbs.”⁵⁶

However, these declarations have not gone without pushbacks. In 2019 Srđan Šušnica, was fired from his job as a performance auditor in the Main Public Sector Audit Service of the Republika Srpska. The explanation for such a decision was described to be made by following disciplinary proceedings against him, in which he was found to be "responsible for having publicly manifested his political beliefs to the detriment of the public reputation of the auditor and the professional status and public reputation of the Main Public Sector Audit Office in the period from July 26, 2015 to April 28, 2018 and onwards."⁵⁷

According to Human Rights Defenders in the Western Balkans these actions against Srđan Šušnica were followed by a series of death threats that eventually led him and his family to be relocated under an emergency protection program and eventually to leave Banja Luka. These days he is considered a traitor for criticizing the Serbian government. Specifically, they accuse him of "publicly expressing views such as: that the Republika Srpska is a 'genocidal creation', that the authorities in the Republika Srpska and Serbia are abusing Dayton to multiply and repeat injustice and to consolidate all the consequences of the genocidal homogenization of Serbs in a cleansed territory, and so on."⁵⁸ Despite this and his personal situation, he has continued his activism and criticism against Republika Srpska, focusing on culture issues, multiethnicity and the erasure of the war genocide, like the article about Srebrenica published in 2020.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Lamija Grebo, “Bosnian Serbs Celebrate Banned Holiday with Massive Parade,” *Balkan Insight*, January 9, 2025, <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/01/09/bosnian-serbs-celebrate-banned-holiday-with-massive-parade/>.

⁵⁶ “Šušnica: MUP RS danas prebija i ubija Srbe, jer je nesrbe dobrano istrijebio,” *Cazin.NET*, December 25, 2018, <https://www.cazin.net/vijesti/susnica-mup-rs-danas-prebija-i-ubija-srbe>.

⁵⁷ Al Jazeera Balkans. 2019. “Srđan Šušnica dobio otkaz zbog izrečenih stavova.” March 8, 2019. <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2019/3/8/srdan-susnica-dobio-otkaz-zbog-izrecenih-stavova>.

⁵⁸ Armela Xhaho, Anida Šabanović, Rreze Hoxha, Daliborka Uljarević, Biljana Kotevska, Ismail Kamberi, and Sena Marić. *Human Rights Defenders in the Western Balkans: Intimidation Instead of Recognition*. Stockholm: Civil Rights Defenders, 2019. <https://epi.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Human-Rights-Defenders-Report.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Srđan Šušnica, “The Legacy of Srebrenica and the Bitter Victories of Genocide,” *JusticeInfo.net*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/44852-legacy-srebrenica-bitter-victories-genocide.html>.

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Memories and Media Freedom Silencing in Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Case of Vildana Selimbegović, and the Obstacles to European Union Membership

Benedetta Casella, Ece Tanyer, Kim Egberth Litelnoni

Where colliding memories and ethnonational narratives collide, media freedom becomes vital to hold political power accountable, the public aware and the victims from all sides of violent conflicts and crimes remembered. In the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, where conflicting narratives divide the population, erases victims and memory itself becomes a political tool, the need for independent media outlets and independent journalism becomes critical. Vildana Selimbegović's career is a testament to this: A Bosnian journalist reporting on her country's past and present, facing persistent violent and legal threats. Her case serves as an intersection point of legal, gendered and memory-based pressures against independent journalists and media freedom, showcasing a complex relationship between memory, media and political obstacles that also impacts Bosnia-Herzegovina's membership to the European Union.

Among many factors, memory holds a strong influence on media freedom in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). Memory is society's selective recollection, interpretation, and promotion of past events⁶⁰. Monuments, movies or music, and even national holidays are some of the means to solidify a certain group's memory of the past. But as different groups could interpret the same event differently, memories could collide either horizontally between those groups or vertically, between the dominant memories and the non-dominant ones. Indeed, there have been some cases in which media freedom was limited because of journalists challenging the dominant memory. As BiH is striving for EU membership, it is crucial to untangle the links between memories and media repression. But to understand why memory plays such a crucial role, it is first necessary to trace the events following BiH's independence.

⁶⁰ D Sudha Rani and Rachel Irdaya Raj, *Memory Studies in the Digital Age* (London: Routledge India, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003508564>.

The situation following BiH's independence on 1st of March 1992 quickly deteriorated as the state began to fracture primarily along ethnic lines. As early as 31st of March 1992, the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), Serb Democratic Party (SDS) authorities and paramilitary volunteers began attacking towns they envisaged as part of a Serb nation⁶¹. The goal of the SDS as they declared since September 1991 is to create 'Serb Autonomous Regions' and link them into a 'Republika Srpska' ('Serb Republic'). In July 1995, the Army of Republika Srpska under the command of General Ratko Mladić, committed a genocide that killed more than 8,000 men and boys in the UN designated "safe areas" of Srebrenica. The Srebrenica Genocide is considered to be the worst atrocity in Europe since the Holocaust and Europe's only acknowledged genocide since World War II.⁶² Other military forces in BiH committed crimes during the war. In 1993, for example, the Croatian Defence Council (HVO) committed atrocities against Bosniaks in the village of Ahmici that resulted in 116 Bosniak civilians, including 11 children and 32 women killed⁶³. On the same day, Bosnian Army killed 15 civilians and seven Croat soldiers who had surrendered in the village of Trusina⁶⁴. But when it comes to the levels of ideological commitment, organizations and resources involved, as well as the number of victims, these crimes pale in comparison to the politics that led to the Srebrenica Genocide.

Upon the signing of Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), the country was divided into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina where majority of Bosniaks and Croats reside, and the Republika Srpska, for the majority of Bosnian-Serbs. Furthermore, DPA also made BiH adopt a tripartite Presidency where it is led by three Presidents from each ethnic group.⁶⁵ So far, this political division has managed to quell the violence

61 Catherine Baker, *The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s*, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-39899-4>.

62 RECOM Reconciliation Network, "Decade of Remembrance: Memory Politics and Commemorative Practices in the Post-Yugoslav Countries", January 2024. <https://www.recom.link/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Decade-of-Remembrance.pdf>.

63 Talha Ozturk, "Bosnia Herzegovina Remembers Victims of Ahmici Massacre," Anadolu Agency, April 16, 2024,

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/bosnia-herzegovina-remembers-victims-of-ahmici-massacre/3193427>.

64 Lamija Grebo, "One day, two massacres: remembering Bosnia's Ahmici and Trusina atrocities," Balkan Insight, April 21,

<https://balkaninsight.com/2023/04/14/one-day-two-massacres-remembering-bosnias-ahmici-and-trusina-atrocities/bti/>.

65 Berkeley Political Review. "Three Presidents, Two Entities, One Dilemma," October 26, 2023. <https://bpr.studentorg.berkeley.edu/2023/10/26/three-presidents-two-entities-one-dilemma/>.

within the country.

But, political division also results in memory division. Each group promotes events that favors their own struggle or victimhood while keeping their own crimes on the sideline. In Republika Srpska for example, the Srebrenica Genocide is ignored, downplayed and denied.⁶⁶ However, they consistently commemorate 9th of January as the day Republika Srpska declares their independence despite such celebration considered unconstitutional.⁶⁷ Concurrently, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina highly commemorates Srebrenica Genocide while considered to be downplaying other crimes such as the Kazani killings. This would then pose a significant challenge for journalists who attempted to report contradicting narrative.

An example of journalism from Bosnia and Herzegovina going beyond dominant ethnonational narratives is the case of Vildana Selimbegović. Currently the editor-in-chief of the Bosnian daily newspaper "*Oslobođenje*", she began her career at the dawn of the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. When the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina broke out, she started reporting the atrocities that took place during the war.⁶⁸ While Selimbegović mentions she was not in a position to be objective because she was "*unable to go ask the other side*,"⁶⁹ she reported on "*all perpetrators of war crimes regardless of religion or ethnicity*," putting her own Bosniak identity and personal loss during the war aside.⁷⁰ In line with her following the journalistic duty of holding political power accountable and the public aware, in 1994, Selimbegović was the first⁷¹ to publish excerpts of the secret trial on the Kazani pit killings, on newspaper *Dani*:⁷² a heinous crime carried out by the 10th Mountain Brigade of the Bosnian Army,

⁶⁶ Manoug Antaby, "Contested Srebrenica Genocide Memorialisation: Prospects for Reconciliation through Community Healing", Platform for Peace & Humanity, 2025

<https://peacehumanity.org/monitor/contested-srebrenica-genocide-memorialisation-prospects-for-reconciliation-through-community-healing/>

⁶⁷ Azem Kurtic, "Bosnian Serbs Defy Court Ban With Another January 9 Parade", BalkanInsight, January 9, 2026

<https://balkaninsight.com/2026/01/09/bosnian-serbs-defy-court-ban-with-another-january-9-parade/>

⁶⁸ Amela Bulja and Armela Subasic, "Bosnia: Journalist above All," *Transitions Online*, no. 06/10, June 10, 2008, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=122012>, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Bulja and Subasic, p. 2

⁷⁰ Simmons, Cynthia. "Women's Work and the Growth of Civil Society in Post-War Bosnia." *Nationalities Papers* 35, no. 1 (2007): 171–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905990601129446>, p. 180.

⁷¹ Bulja and Subasic, p. 2

⁷² Radio Sarajevo, "Sarajevska najpoznatija javna tajna: Caco, Kazani i zločini nad Srbima", July 28, 2015, <https://radiosarajevo.ba/metromahala teme/sarajevska-najpoznatija-javna-tajna-caco-kazani-i-zlocini-nad-srbima/196030>

led by Mušan "Caco" Topalović, who ordered the killing of Sarajevan civilians,⁷³ consisting of mainly Bosnian Serbs.⁷⁴ Selimbegović's decision to publish the minutes of the secret trial was a direct challenge to the dominant ethnonational narratives: As a Bosnian Muslim herself, she was reporting on the crimes committed by Bosniaks targeting Serbs; while the majority of the dominant narratives focused solely on the Bosniak victims and neglected the Serbian victims of the war. As was to be expected, she soon received severe death threats in the streets and over the phone, notably the bombing of *Dani's* editorial office,⁷⁵ due to reporting on the crimes of the Bosnian Army during the war, organized crime and political corruption.⁷⁶ These physical attacks and threats were the first ones of a long series she received due to her commitment to her work and duty as a journalist: "*If I thought that what I'm doing made no impact on the society, I wouldn't be doing it.*"⁷⁷

Selimbegović's work has been one of the most important in uncovering, remembering and *naming* the victims of the Kazani pit killings. Due to her persistent and vocal covering of the atrocity, the victims are being remembered, the desecration of the monuments and the different treatment of the victims and perpetrators are being talked about.⁷⁸ Her advocacy was not only for the victims who have been killed during the war, but it extends and persists for those who survived the war.⁷⁹

Despite the ongoing restrictive political context that challenges free and independent journalism in BiH and the many threats she was received since her earlier days, Vildana Selimbegović remains an impartial journalist covering controversial topics,⁸⁰ and faces physical and legal threats tied directly to her reporting.⁸¹ These threats are far from generic: Her past work daring to challenge the dominant ethnonational narratives

⁷³ Vildana Selimbegović, "Sarajevo's Homage to Caca", ProPeace, October 30, 2023 <https://www.propeace.de/en/sarajevos-homage-caca>

⁷⁴ Vildana Selimbegović, "Žrtve žrtava na Kazanima", Žurnal, October 30, 2025 <https://www.zurnal.info/clanak/zrtve-zrtava-na-kazanima/28398>

⁷⁵ Bulja and Subasic, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 4

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 6

⁷⁸ Vildana Selimbegović, "Sarajevo's Homage to Caca", Propeace.de, October 30, 2023, <https://www.propeace.de/en/sarajevos-homage-caca>.

⁷⁹ Simmons, p. 180-181.

⁸⁰ Vildana Selimbegović, "Kolumna Vildane Selimbegović: Schmidtova polovina paketa", Istraga, August 1, 2022 <https://istraga.ba/kolumna-vildane-selimbegovic-schmidtova-polovina-paketa/>

⁸¹ BHJA, "Threats against the lives and limbs of journalists, Vildana Selimbegović, Oslobođenje, Sarajevo, 01.08.2022", Safejournalist.net, August 3, 2022 <https://safejournalists.net/incident/threats-against-the-lives-and-limbs-of-journalists-vildana-selimbegovic-osloboden-je-sarajevo-01-08-2022/>

shapes the abuse she receives, which includes statements such as “*you will look into the pit.*”⁸²

Vildana Selimbegović continues to be subjected to legal threats and lawsuits, which in some cases take the form of Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation, better known with the acronym SLAPP. SLAPPs represent a vicious use of the law to silence critical voices, and are often used by political powers to obstruct journalists’ work that challenges dominant narratives of governments and political elites. In 2023, the People’s Assembly of Republika Srpska⁸³ also adopted a legal provision criminalizing defamation, increasing the chilling effects of legal threats and the risk of self-censorship of independent journalists, taking a further step back regarding freedom of the press.⁸⁴ Selimbegović denounces this environment as hostile especially for small and medium media whose expenses for long SLAPP trials represent a further burden for their already weak financial situation and – thus, independence – in BiH. She is determined to announce such lawsuits, or “*semi-hidden threats,*” as she believes that the lawsuits reflect the actors and what and how they react to as much as the articles written and published in *Oslobođenje*.⁸⁵

The case of Vildana Selimbegović and the overall situation of independent journalists and media outlets in BiH, emphasizes how critical media freedom is within places where colliding memories co-exist. For political elites, controlling the media becomes the most effective way of controlling narratives and ensuring the general public has access only to one specific aspect of history: the version which serves their political agendas. As such, memory issues and media freedom become irrevocably intertwined. Especially in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina where three dominant, mutually exclusive ethnic memories co-exist in the public and political spheres, it is impossible to separate

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ EEAS Press Team, “BiH: Statement by the Spokesperson on the defamation law in Republika Srpska”, European Union External Action, August 26, 2023
https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/bih-statement-spokesperson-defamation-law-republika-srpska_en

⁸⁴ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, “2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Bosnia and Herzegovina”, US Department of State, August 12, 2025
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

⁸⁵ Nebojša Šatara, “SLAPP tužbe u BiH: Sve dok je naše pravosuđe u raljama politike, nama su progoni (pre)suđeni”, Nezavisno društvo novinara Vojvodine, October 17, 2023
<https://ndnv.org/2023/10/slapp-tuzbe-u-bih-sve-dok-je-nase-pravosude-u-raljama-politike-nama-su-progoni-presude-ni/>

memory issues from the guarantee of independent and impartial journalism. On its path towards full membership in the EU, these attacks against impartial journalism can be considered as attempts to capture the narrative and hinder the reconciliation processes within BiH,⁸⁶ silencing any voice threatening to complicate the established and simplified ethno-nationalistic memories.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's path to the EU passes through the accession process, where *Priority 12* of the European Commission's *14 Key Priorities* mandates the guarantee of freedom of expression and the protection of journalists.⁸⁷ Since the accession negotiations between the EU and Bosnia were opened in 2024, the country has been marked by a visible stagnation and worrying signs of deterioration in media freedom⁸⁸ through legislative backsliding and an increasingly hostile environment for independent reporting.

In recent years, there has been a deliberate shift from physical violence to judicial harassment to silence journalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁸⁹ Especially since 2023, when Republika Srpska has re-criminalized defamation,⁹⁰ the media landscape in BiH has taken an even more restrictive turn.⁹¹ The number of SLAPPs has increased rapidly, becoming the most common⁹² weapon of choice of political and business elites in Bosnia to threaten, pressure and silence journalists and civil society.

SLAPPs' main goal is not the reparation of damages caused to the plaintiff but to

⁸⁶ European Commission, "Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025 Report", European Commission, November 4, 2025

https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5d8fc547-f8f8-456f-84e3-b38998acfafd_en?file_name=bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2025.pdf

⁸⁷ European Commission, "Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023 Report", European Commission, November 8, 2023 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A52023SC0691>

⁸⁸ EC, "Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025 Report"

⁸⁹ Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Media Pluralism Monitor 2025 results", Centre for Media Pluralism and Media, 2025

<https://cmpf.eui.eu/country/bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

⁹⁰ EEAS Press Team, "BiH: Statement by the Spokesperson on the defamation law in Republika Srpska", European Union External Action, August 26, 2023

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/bih-statement-spokesperson-defamation-law-republika-srpska_en

⁹¹ Reporters sans frontières, "Bosnia-Herzegovina", Reporters sans frontières, 2025 <https://rsf.org/en/country/bosnia-herzegovina>

⁹² Council of Europe, "Strengthening Legal Safeguards against Defamation and SLAPPs in Bosnia and Herzegovina", Council of Europe, October 17, 2025

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/-/council-of-europe-supports-strategic-dialogue-on-democracy-and-media-freedom-at-the-donbas-media-forum-2025-1>

*“financially, physically and mentally drain the target.”*⁹³ SLAPPs are especially effective in the Bosnian context since economic realities already limit the independent newsrooms and journalists and a single lawsuit can drive them into bankruptcy without a verdict being reached. The lack of explicitly anti-SLAPP regulations in Bosnia and Herzegovina creates the ample opportunity *“for the misuse of legal systems to silence critical voices.”*⁹⁴ In early 2026, this alarming trend of political and business elites using the judicial systems as a weapon of censorship continues to by-pass the EU anti-SLAPP standards and creating a persistent culture of self-censorship where most investigative *“memory work”* gets abandoned before it even begins.

The attack against media freedom in BiH is also not gender-neutral. Women in media are disproportionately targeted and harassed with physical threats, online violence and psychological harassment *“with a distinct gender-based component”*⁹⁵ and every fifth woman journalist in BiH has experienced some form of such discrimination. In 2025, 8 cases of severe attacks against women journalists with explicit gender-based violence elements were officially recorded,⁹⁶ a figure likely representing only the tip of the iceberg since most harassment remains unreported due to the lack of trust in institutions. However, there are some signs of, albeit small, progress: landmark rulings in 2025 established precedents such as the conviction of a public official for the *“gender-based humiliation of a journalist”* by the Basic Court in Banja Luka. Additionally, the detention of a suspect involved in serious online threats against women journalists and other women in public life⁹⁷ offer a degree of optimism regarding the recognition and penalization of gender-based violence against women in the media.

⁹³ Adis Nadarević, “ANJA BOSILKOVA ANTOVSKA: Trend rasta broja SLAPP-tužbi na Balkanu je intenzivan i zabrinjavajući!”, Objavi.ba, September 18, 2025

<https://objavi.ba/anja-bosilkova-antovska-trend-rasta-broja-slapp-tuzbi-na-balkanu-je-intenzivan-i-zabrinjavajuci/>

⁹⁴ Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, “Bosnia and Herzegovina: Media Pluralism Monitor 2025 results”, Centre for Media Pluralism and Media, 2025

<https://cmpf.eu.eu/country/bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

⁹⁵ Lajla Zaimović Kurtović, “Bosnia and Herzegovina - Women Journalists’ Safety – 2024 - SafeJournalists”, SafeJournalists, January 27, 2026,

<https://safejournalists.net/publication/security-of-female-journalists-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>.

⁹⁶ Maja Radević, “BH Journalists: 35 Attacks and Threats against Journalists Registered in 2025 - BH Novinari,” BH novinari, January 12, 2026,

<https://bhnovinari.ba/en/2026/01/12/bh-journalists-a-total-of-35-attacks-on-journalists-and-media-outlets-registered-in-bih-in-2025-political-p pressures-intensifying/>.

⁹⁷ Maja Radević, “BH Journalists: 35 Attacks and Threats against Journalists Registered in 2025 - BH Novinari,” BH novinari, January 12, 2026,

<https://bhnovinari.ba/en/2026/01/12/bh-journalists-a-total-of-35-attacks-on-journalists-and-media-outlets-registered-in-bih-in-2025-political-p pressures-intensifying/>.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, media freedom is more than a benchmark for EU membership; it is perceived as a threat by the political elite, whose existence depends on politicization and dissemination of memories at the expense of reconciliation. As critical voices continue to be repressed by physical, financial and psychological threats, media freedom and thus, democracy will continue to deteriorate.

In the absence of a strong and independent media system, the road to reconciliation, democracy, and EU membership of BiH will inevitably continue to be compromised.

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https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/new-eu-rules-protect-against-strategic-lawsuits-against-public-participation-enter-force-2024-05-03_en

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Beyond the Homeland War Myth: different memories, media freedom under attack and the Drago Pilsel case

Gabriele Cavalli, Alessio Moncada, Manuel Camera

Croatia's memory of the Yugoslav wars remains contested, with the dominant narrative portraying the conflict between 1991 and 1995 as a heroic defence against the Serbian aggression, while alternative memories tend to propose more nuanced interpretations, highlighting also the war crimes committed by Croatian forces. These two conflictual perspectives are linked to the media freedom challenges that still afflict the country, resulting problematic for what concerns the EU integration pressures. Lastly, the matter is exemplified by the case of Drago Pilsel.

This article will examine these dynamics in two parts. The first part will focus on the analysis of the memory context in Croatia and its recent evolution. The second part will then focus on the media freedom situation in Croatia, taking in consideration the wider European context while presenting the case of Drago Pilsel.

The general dominant memory regarding the Yugoslav wars in Croatia focuses on the concept of "Homeland War", which emphasizes the conflict between 1991 and 1995 as a defensive one against the aggression of Serbian forces. This specific memory tends to celebrate military victories, such as the Operation Storm (1995), as symbols of national liberation and survival⁹⁸.

This narrative gained consensus during the post-conflict period and under the presidency of Trudman through commemorations, war monuments or the use of media agencies to promote the actions of Croatian national forces as heroic⁹⁹.

On the other hand, alternative memories challenge this narrative using concepts such as "reconciliation" and "multi-victimhood", which aims at recognizing all the crimes committed. An example is given by the murder of the Zec family, which had led to no real consequences for what concerns the juridical point of view. Key actors that support this alternative memory are civil society organizations such as Documenta Center for Dealing with The Past ¹⁰⁰, independent academics and minor media. The aim of these

⁹⁸ Cultures and History Forum, A Storm of Memory in Post-War Croatia, <https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/debates/a-storm-of-memory-in-post-war-croatia>

⁹⁹ Pavlaković, V. (2021). The Legacy of War and Nation-Building in Croatia since 1990. In : Apor, B. & Newman, J. P. (eds.). *Balkan Legacies: The Long Shadow of Conflict and Ideological Experiment in Southeastern Europe* (pp. 21-56). West Lafayette: Purdue University Press.

¹⁰⁰ Documenta, Centre for Dealing with the Past, <https://documenta.hr/en/>

actors is to push for acknowledgements of shared suffering between the different ethnic groups during the conflict by establishing the truth and honouring the victims with inclusive memorial sites¹⁰¹.

Also, the evolution of these alternative memories stems from different geopolitical and social phenomena that happened in Croatia. In fact, these memories were developed in the early 2000s, which corresponds to the rise of new political national actors, such as Zoran Milanović, who challenged the HDZ leaderships.¹⁰²

This period corresponds also to Croatia's formal request to access the EU. Lastly, another crucial element to explain the evolution of these theories may be given by younger generations, who lack the direct experience of war and prefer a more pluralistic view¹⁰³.

Regardless, the Croatian case illustrates how post-war memory is being shaped by an official, state-sponsored narrative and alternative memories that challenge its dogmas but struggle to gain recognition within the public and institutional context¹⁰⁴.

However, reforms remain incomplete, particularly regarding media transparency, SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) to intimidate reporters, and political influence over the national public broadcaster (HRT).

The "2024 Rule of Law Report-country chapter situation of Croatia" confirms the thesis, adding more problems regarding transparency and media freedom, such as delays in accessing public information.¹⁰⁵

Despite some progress, the report highlighted limited advances in digital media regulation and continued legislative stagnation in addressing physical and online threats against journalists who investigate sensitive topics, such as corruption and war

¹⁰¹ Banjeglav, Tamara. "Conflicting memories, competing narratives and contested histories in Croatia's post-war commemorative practices." *Politička misao* 49.05 (2012): 7-31.

¹⁰² Vlada Republike Hrvatske website, all Governments, <https://vlada.gov.hr/prethodne-vlade-11348/11348?lang=it>

¹⁰³ Milekić, Sven. "Croatian Veterans' Construction of the Dominant 1990s War Narrative in the 2000-2005 period: Between Preservation and Negotiation." *Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva: časopis za politologiju* 22.1 (2025): 1-22.

¹⁰⁴ Renata Jambrešić Kirin, Fear, Humanity And Managing The Heritage Of War: Two Narratives From Western Slavonia, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/en/file/347397>

¹⁰⁵ European Commission, 2024 Rule of Law Report-Croatia, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/9abb25c0-0dfe-4006-8753-257844de834e_en?filename=27_1_58065_coun_chap_croatia_en.pdf

crimes¹⁰⁶. In this context, the European Media Freedom Act aims to strengthen media independence and journalist protection across Member States, though its effectiveness remains to be assessed.¹⁰⁷

The case of Drago Pilsel is emblematic and perfectly shows the challenges in Croatia's implementation of safeguards for media freedom. Drago Pilsel is a Croatian investigative journalist who was among the first to report about Croatian war crimes against Serb civilians in Lika and Gaspic¹⁰⁸ and whose material was then used by prosecutors at the ICTY¹⁰⁹.

He was born in Argentina in 1962, and his parents were Croatian immigrants who came to Buenos Aires after World War II. Pilsel became a priest of the Franciscan order at a young age but left the order during the Croatian War of Independence to enlist in the Croatian army. For a long period of his life Pilsel was a strong Croatian nationalist and this was the main reason that led him to join the army. After witnessing the atrocities of the war and after his brother went missing, he decided to leave the army to pursue the journalist career¹¹⁰.

In his articles, he denounced the war crimes committed by the Croatian forces during the war and this drew harsh criticism from Croatian nationalists. Pilsel has been particularly vocal about war crimes committed by Croatian forces during the 1991–1995 Croatian War of Independence. He highlighted incidents such as the killings in the villages of Komic and Poljice near Udbina, which occurred during Operation Storm in August 1995¹¹¹.

According to reports, Croatian soldiers entered the village with tanks and armoured vehicles, shooting and burning houses, resulting in civilian casualties. Pilsel, along with other human rights activists, pointed out that investigations into these crimes have been insufficient and that very few perpetrators have been brought to justice.

¹⁰⁶ International Press Institute, EU enlargement Package article, <https://ipi.media/eu-enlargement-package-assessments-must-now-translate-into-meaningful-media-freedom-action/>

¹⁰⁷ European Commission, European Media Freedom Act website, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/protecting-democracy/european-media-freedom-act_en

¹⁰⁸ government of Canada, Report of Medak Pocket Operations, <https://www.canada.ca/en/army/services/line-sight/articles/2021/11/report-on-medak-pocket-operations.html>

¹⁰⁹ ICTY website regarding the Gaspic massacre, <https://www.icty.org/case/norac>

¹¹⁰ Balkan insight website, Drago Pilsel: a Remarkable Journey Through War, Faith and Loss, 29/01/2025. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/01/29/drago-pilsel-a-remarkable-journey-through-war-faith-and-loss/>

¹¹¹ Drago Pilsel's Interview. Drago Pilsel: from Ustachia to Anti-Fascist. Radio Slobodna Evropa website, 2014. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/intervju-drago-pilsel-od-ustase-do-antifasiste/25249275.html>

In 2014, Drago Pilsel condemned an incident occurred at Zagreb Airport, when Dario Kordić, a Bosnian Croat war criminal who was released from prison after serving two-thirds of his 25-year sentence, was greeted by supporters and a church service was held in his honour by the archbishop of Zagreb. Pilsel strongly condemned this event by stating it was disrespectful towards all the innocent victims of the Yugoslav wars.

His criticism towards this incident led to a series of public attacks against his work as a journalist. For example, in 2015 he received an anonymous letter with death threats whereas in 2018 he received several insults and threats via Facebook on his profile.¹¹² Moreover, in 2020, Drago Pilsel was the victim of a verbal aggression that occurred in a restaurant in Zagreb, representing an unpleasant and frightening episode for the journalist.

Despite its EU membership, Croatia still struggles on implementing EU standards on media freedom. Right after the war, discussing Croatian war crimes was practically taboo for several reasons. Croatia was a newly independent state, still consolidating sovereignty and state institutions. The war was fresh, and the government promoted a unifying national story to foster patriotism and social cohesion. Criticism of Croatian forces or acknowledgement of Croatian-perpetrated atrocities was seen as threatening this fragile unity.

The ruling parties were nationalist-oriented, often dismissing or denying war crimes allegations to protect the image of the Croatian military and leadership. Nonetheless, there have been some developments toward a more inclusive memory.

For example, in 2021, the then Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, during his commemoration of Vukovar, invited an ethnic Serb Deputy, Vice-Prime Minister from the SDSS Boris Milošević, to participate in the commemoration as a symbolic gesture of reconciliation¹¹³. Civil society groups, independent journalists, and some political leaders have pushed for more openness, transparency, and accountability.

In 1991, during the early phase of the Croatian War of Independence, some members of the Zec family (belonging to the Serb minority community in Zagreb) were brutally murdered by a group of Croatian militiamen. Despite knowledge of the events, there has

¹¹² Mapping Media Freedom, <https://www.mappingmediafreedom.org/> ; Mapping Media Freedom, Editor Receives Death Threats <https://www.mapmf.org/alert/18850>

¹¹³ Decade of Remembrance: Memory Politics and Commemorative Practices in the Post-Yugoslav Countries, Remembrance Day for the Victims of the Homeland War, and Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja (November 18, 1991), Helena Ivanov et al. (pag. 63)

been no full criminal accountability for all those responsible. This crime is widely regarded as one of the most emblematic cases of war-time violence against civilians of the Serb minority in Croatia, and has become a test-case for memory, justice and minority-rights issues. For many years, the site of the murder (the mountain lodge site at Adolfovac on Medvednica/Sljeme) remained unmarked, without an official public memorial.

Civil society groups and minority-rights organisations repeatedly campaigned for a proper marker, public recognition, and naming of a public space. In 2022, the Mayor of Zagreb announced that a memorial plaque would be installed at the location. The plaque (placed in 2023) has a text that name-checks the victims and the fact that the perpetrators were never punished, and explicitly states the crime was committed by members of the reserve unit of the Croatian Ministry of Interior¹¹⁴.

¹¹⁴ Decade of Remembrance: Memory Politics and Commemorative Practices in the Post-Yugoslav Countries, Killing of the Zec Family members (December 7, 1991), Helena Ivanov et al. (pag. 70). <https://recas.info/books/decade-of-remembrance-memory-politics-and-commemorative-practices-in-the-post-yugoslav-countries/>

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