

*Strengthening Media Freedom
in Bosnia and Herzegovina,
North Macedonia and Serbia*

**FREE
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Press statement from the third Regional Conference of the initiative: “Strengthening Media Freedom in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia”

Mavrovo, 20 September 2024

The third regional conference, held on 18-20 September 2024 in Mavrovo (North Macedonia), brought together more than 70 journalists and members of the judiciary for a dialogue on “Strengthening Media Freedom in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Serbia.” Both the judiciary and journalists are essential in upholding the rule of law in the Western Balkans. For this, trust and understanding between the two fields are necessary, which these regional conferences aimed to foster.

The conference was organised by Free Press Unlimited and the Netherlands Helsinki Committee with support from the Association of Journalists of Macedonia. The Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to North Macedonia, H.E. Özlem Canel, gave an opening speech, along with Mladen Chadikovski, President of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, and Ilir Iseni, Acting Director of the Academy for Judges and Prosecutors North Macedonia.

This regional conference was the last of three, the others having taken place in December 2023 in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in October 2022 in Serbia, and served as a conclusion to four years of dedicated efforts in the “Strengthening Media Freedom in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Serbia” project, which was funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Among the topics discussed were disinformation, legal attacks, and impunity, all of which heavily impact the rule of law and media freedom in the region. A round table on SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) examined the threats for journalists posed by these types of legal attacks and explored legislative initiatives designed to address the increasing use of SLAPPs in the Western Balkans. Regarding attacks on journalists, impunity was identified as a major threat. During a session on tackling impunity, speakers discussed its effect on journalists, civil society organisations, and society at large, noting that when justice was served, this discouraged attacks on journalists.

The conference also included a workshop, organised by the Netherlands’ Training and Study Centre for the Judiciary, where judges, prosecutors and journalists explored mutual understanding of the roles that media and judiciary play in society and discussed possible ways forward.

An important element of this concluding conference was to discuss how to move forward and continue along this path of encouraging legal protection for journalists by fostering dialogue

between the judiciary and journalists. "We saw how these dialogues positively impacted the understanding between independent media and the judiciary over the past four years. We believe there is a need to continue and to increase our reach by including more countries like Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro, to counter the rise in attacks on journalists in the Western Balkan," said Albana Shala, Senior Programme Coordinator for the Western Balkans at Free Press Unlimited.

Please refer to the Outcome Statement of the meeting for our vision on the way forward.

More information on our initiative:

Freedom of the media is one of the cornerstones of a well-functioning democracy, and journalists are vital watchdogs who make sure governments answer responsibly to the needs of citizens. Unfortunately, the media sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia is not always able to function safely and journalists have been harassed, attacked and killed for simply doing their job.

Our initiative "Strengthening Media Freedom in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia" combines training, advocacy and capacity strengthening of the judiciary and media to improve the capacity of the judicial sector to respond adequately to the threats journalists face, whilst at the same time improving the conditions under which the media operates. The Netherlands Helsinki Committee and Free Press Unlimited recognize the wide variety and diversity present in each of the participating countries, which calls for country-specific approaches. We work together with journalist associations - BH Journalists Association (BH Novinari), Association of Journalists of Macedonia (3HM), Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS) and the Judicial Trainings Centres - Centre for Judicial and Prosecutorial Training of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (CEST BiH), Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors of the Republic North Macedonia, Judicial Academy of the Republic of Serbia (Pravosudna Akademija).

This initiative is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. As Henk van den Dool, the Ambassador of the Netherlands to Bosnia and Herzegovina, noted, "rule of law cannot exist without confidence in the judiciary and journalists are essential in breeding that trust." To achieve our aims, the Netherlands Helsinki Committee and Free Press Unlimited work together with a number of Dutch institutional experts in this field, namely the Training and Study Centre for the Judiciary (Studiecentrum Rechtspleging), and the Netherlands Association of Journalists (Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten).

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