

25 March 2024,

Subject: the situation of journalists of Ana Lalić Hegediš and Dinko Gruhonjić in Novi Sad

To:

Mr Vucic, President of Serbia

Mr Stamenkovic, Public Prosecutor in General Public Prosecution and member of the Standing working group

Ms Brnabic, Prime Minister and President of National Parliament

Mr Gasic, Minister of Interior

Mr Jovanovic, Minister of Information and Telecommunication

We would like to bring to your attention the urgent situation concerning the safety of journalists Ana Lalić Hegediš and Dinko Gruhonjić, leaders of the Vojvodina Association of Independent Journalists (NDNV). Over the past fifteen days, both journalists have been subjected to an onslaught of online death threats following their participation in the Rebedu Festival in Dubrovnik. The situation escalated on 21 March when graffiti was discovered at Gruhonjić's residence. The journalists are facing imminent threats to their lives, prompting urgent action from law enforcement.

Since 8 March, Lalić Hegediš has endured terrifying online death threats, some of a sexual nature, alongside grave insults targeting both her and the NDNV she leads. Similarly, since 14 March, Gruhonjić, program director of NDNV who is also a journalist and lecturer at Novi Sad University, has been subjected to a public campaign of intimidation, including threats of physical violence. This campaign stemmed from a manipulated video montage from Gruhonjić's participation to the Rebedu Festival last year, giving the impression that Dinko was expressing his satisfaction at sharing a name with the Ustasha criminal Dinko Šakić, who was found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Second World war.

On 21 March, an unknown individual went to Gruhonjić' private residence to paint a threatening graffiti on the wall of the entrance of his building saying that Dinko will soon have "forever home". The individual signed "Serbian Vojvodina". The graffiti demonstrates the ease with which perpetrators can locate him and his family, underscoring the seriousness of the threats both journalists are facing.

Despite the NDNV reporting the alarming threats to the high-tech crime prosecutor's office and providing details of some of identified perpetrators, including those who signed threats with their names, no decisive action has been taken to conduct thorough investigation, arrest the perpetrators nor to provide the journalists with adequate protection.

We urge authorities to launch immediate investigations and implement measures to ensure the safety and protection of Lalić Hegediš and Gruhonjić.

Politicians and officials must also be held accountable for their role in perpetuating hatred against journalists. Public statements from individuals such as Aleksandar Vulin, former director of the Security Information Agency and founder of the Socialist Movement party and Milenko Jovanov, MP at the Parliament last 18 March, only serve to escalate hatred and endanger lives. There are also serious concerns that members of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party are behind the lynching campaign against Lalić Hegediš and Gruhonjić. The person who filed a criminal complaint against them for allegedly inciting racial, religious and national hatred and intolerance during their participation in the forum is closely associated with party figures such as Aleksa Grubešić, member of the Serbian Progressive Party.

It is the responsibility of the State to protect journalists and provide them with the necessary protection to enable them to carry out their work. The policy of impunity in the face of threats to the independence of the press in Serbia must end.

Thank you for your attention to these matters. We remain available for any further information.

Respectfully,

Ricardo Gutiérrez, General Secretary of the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)

Anthony Bellanger, General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)

Luisa Chiodi, Director of the Balkans and Caucasus Transeuropa Observatory (OBCT)

Quinn McKew, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19

Oliver Money-Kyrle, Head of Europe Advocacy and Programmes at International Press Institute (IPI)

European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF)

SafeJournalists Network