

Meta Platforms
1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park, CA 94025
USA

Dear Sir/Madam,

We are contacting you regarding a series of temporary suspensions and permanent shutdowns of Instagram accounts belonging to independent media outlets and media workers in Serbia - primarily newsrooms and media professionals who cover matters of public interest and who report professionally and consistently on issues important to citizens. This situation has deprived a significant number of citizens of access to relevant and timely information.

The fact that some accounts have, in certain cases, been reinstated in the meantime does not diminish the harm being done to freedom of expression; given the current situation in Serbia, it can be expected that similar cases will recur in the period ahead.

In recent weeks, a pattern has been observed of mass reporting and mass following of accounts with the aim of prompting Meta to shut down the accounts in question. Such activities constitute an abuse of Instagram's Community Guidelines (a social network owned by Meta) and are intended as digital sabotage of independent media. There are serious indications that these are coordinated bot-driven and automated activities. These attacks have led to what are most likely automated suspensions, often without clear justification, without prior warning, and without an effective mechanism for rapid appeal. This practice is of serious concern, as it has a direct and disproportionate impact on professional media and their ability to fulfill their role in society.

These developments cannot be viewed as isolated incidents; they are occurring within the broader context of a serious and long-term deterioration of media freedom in Serbia. Independent and critical media have for years operated in an extremely unfavorable environment, marked by continuous political, economic, and security pressures that directly affect the possibility of free and professional journalism. These pressures include frequent threats and physical attacks on journalists, campaigns of discreditation and dehumanization in pro-government media, public targeting of journalists and editors by public officials, and the misuse of judicial mechanisms through Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), aimed at financially exhausting and intimidating newsrooms.

In addition, systematic restrictions on access to information of public importance, non-transparent institutional conduct, and selective treatment of the media further narrow the space for critical reporting. Media pluralism and media freedom are continuously eroding, as confirmed by numerous reports by domestic and international organizations pointing to a steady decline in the state of media freedom in Serbia. Due to the high concentration of control over traditional media, digital platforms and social networks have become one of the few remaining spaces where independent media and journalists can publish and exchange information freely - making these actions an attempt to restrict that space for free expression as well.

In such an environment, digital platforms and social networks have become key - often primary - channels of communication for independent media, as well as for individual journalists and media

workers. They are spaces where news is published in real time, investigative content, verified information, and analyses of public interest are shared, and where direct interaction with the audience takes place. For many newsrooms and journalists, especially those operating outside large media systems or in areas with limited access to traditional media, digital platforms are often the only way for their work to reach the public. It is particularly important to note that a significant number of young citizens receive information about social and political issues exclusively through digital platforms, rather than through traditional media.

Any restriction or shutdown of independent media and journalists' accounts on digital platforms further narrows the space for freedom of expression and media freedom, as it directly obstructs citizens' access to professional information and disrupts ongoing communication with the audience. These mass and coordinated actions represent an abuse of the account reporting system, undermining freedom of expression and the work of legitimate media actors. Moreover, such measures create a so-called "chilling effect," sending the message that professional and critical journalism can be sanctioned without clear criteria and transparent procedures, further endangering media freedom and the public's right to timely and accurate information.

We remind you that freedom of expression is guaranteed by international conventions.

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), Article 10, guarantees everyone the right to freedom of expression. This right includes freedom of opinion and freedom to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN), Article 19, provides that everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right includes the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of one's choice.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, also in Article 19, states that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 11, states that everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right includes freedom of opinion and freedom to receive and impart information or ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. It also provides that the freedom and pluralism of the media shall be respected.

International conventions allow restrictions on freedom of expression only when they are prescribed by law, necessary in a democratic society, and proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued.

We particularly emphasize that the **European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)** requires large online platforms to enable providers of media services to submit declarations regarding their editorial independence and compliance with regulatory requirements for editorial responsibility. When a platform intends to remove, suspend, or limit the visibility of content or a media account, it is obliged to notify the provider, provide a clear and reasoned explanation, and allow the media provider to respond or engage in dialogue. Decisions by the platform to restrict visibility or suspend content must be justified and transparent, and the media provider must be given the opportunity to

respond or participate in dialogue before the decision takes effect. Although Serbia is not a member of the European Union, as it is currently in the process of EU accession, it will inevitably have to implement the provisions of the EMFA in the coming period.

In order to safeguard freedom of expression and the public's right of access to information - rights that are seriously undermined by the current temporary suspensions and account shutdowns - we urge Meta, in line with its obligations under the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) and relevant international standards, to consider and implement the following measures:

- **Urgent review of suspended and deactivated accounts** – All temporary suspensions and permanent shutdowns of media accounts should be urgently reviewed to ensure that decisions were not arbitrary and were not the result of mass or coordinated bot reporting.
- **Public and individualized reasoning for each suspension** – Each affected media account should receive a clear, precise, and reasoned explanation of the grounds for suspension, including the criteria applied, in line with EMFA principles of transparency and proportionality.
- **Investigation into potential abuse of the reporting system** – An analysis and investigation of mass or coordinated reports that led to restrictions on the visibility of media content should be conducted to prevent manipulation of the system.
- **Mechanism to prevent bot-driven and coordinated digital attacks** – The platform should implement effective tools and procedures to detect and neutralize mass false reports or automated attacks targeting media accounts, without jeopardizing legitimate content.
- **Take local context into account when deciding on suspension or shutdown** – When deciding on the suspension or shutdown of media accounts in Serbia, Meta should take the local context into consideration—particularly the state of media freedom—and ensure that such decisions are not made via automated systems (AI/algorithms), but exclusively with the involvement of human moderators.
- **Consultations with journalists' and media associations** – Before making decisions that affect the visibility or existence of media accounts, Meta should introduce mandatory consultations with relevant domestic and international journalists' organizations to ensure the professional and pluralistic application of its policies.

Digital censorship represents a contemporary form of pressure on the media and directly threatens freedom of expression, the democratic order, and citizens' right to timely and accurate information. The shutdown and suspension of media accounts on social networks is not merely a technical issue, but a serious threat to media pluralism and a functioning democratic society. We expect Meta to act responsibly and transparently, in accordance with legal standards, to review existing decisions and take concrete steps to protect the work of legitimate media actors and the public interest.

Since its establishment, the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS) has continuously advocated for the protection of journalists' rights, media freedom, and freedom of expression, recognizing them as key pillars of a democratic society. The association actively monitors and

responds to all forms of pressure, threats, and attacks on journalists - whether physical, legal, or digital - and provides legal, professional, and moral support to its members. NUNS also promotes media pluralism and the ethical standards of the journalistic profession, striving to ensure a safe and protected environment for independent media to operate. In light of the current cases of temporary suspensions and account shutdowns on digital platforms, NUNS underscores that these actions endanger not only individual media actors but also the public's right to information and the democratic process as a whole. NUNS is a member of the European Federation of Journalists and the International Federation of Journalists, with whom we maintain close cooperation, as well as with other relevant international organizations. We will inform them of this case in a timely manner.

We look forward to your response and appreciate your attention to this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Željko Bodrožić
President of Independent Journalists Association of Serbia

