

Working group for media

PUBLIC MEDIA SERVICES IN SERBIA

Discussion paper

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ENCLOSURES

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1. ANALYSIS OF THE RTS NEWS PROGRAM (OCTOBER 2024)

1.1. Overview of Key Findings

- The RTS news program during the observed period exhibited **clear bias** in favor of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). This was evident through **a focus on pseudo-events and topics favorable to the government while minimizing or entirely excluding opposition voices**. A more serious analytical approach was only seen in politically non-controversial topics. Negative events were reported very briefly.
- Although **women were present in the analyzed programs, their participation was significantly lower compared to men**. In discussion programs, a woman appeared as an expert only once. Gender-sensitive language was respected in most cases.
- **RTS did not adhere to the highest standards regarding fact-checking and clarity in reporting. Errors, incorrect information, and numerous inaccuracies were observed. Infographics, charts, and tables were almost entirely absent, reducing the understandability of the content for a broader audience.** The lack of graphic displays diminishes the audience's ability to absorb and understand complex information. Thus, **RTS not only neglects visual language as a communication tool but also the educational function, which is one of its three primary functions.**
- **The content of the Central News was mostly passive, relying on current events and pseudo-events rather than proactively addressing topics of public interest. Journalists did not question officials' statements and often failed to provide context or alternative opinions.**
- Although most segments about Serbia were concentrated on Belgrade, positive strides were made in terms of geographic inclusivity within topics of general interest.
- **Documentaries were of high quality.** In the show "Thursday at 9," dedicated to children who died in traffic accidents, journalists demonstrated **a high level of professionalism and responsibility in conveying very emotional testimonies from parents**. Sensationalism was avoided, and the story was presented with empathy, attention, and

elements of constructive journalism. Also, the segment on the underground city of the Karađorđević dynasty (October 4) was informative and visually rich, offering viewers interesting content about cultural heritage.

- **While certain criticisms could be directed at RTS for its choice of interviewees, they were generally credible experts in their fields.** Except for one case, no space was given to those promoting anti-scientific views or using discriminatory language. During the observed period, RTS's news program promoted trust in science and healthy lifestyles.
- For RTS to truly fulfill its role in society, **more proactive journalism, impartiality, fact-checking, pluralism of voices, and technological innovation are needed.** This would allow the audience not only to be informed but also genuinely empowered to better understand the world around them.

1.2. Introduction

This report summarizes the analysis results of the news program of Radio-Television Serbia (RTS) broadcast during the first seven days of October 2024. Seven editions of the main news program ("Dnevnik 2"), four editions of the show "Oko," seven analytical segments of the morning program ("Press Review" / "Topic of the Day"), as well as one edition each of the shows "Takovska 10" and "Thursday at 9¹," were analyzed. The research relied on qualitative and quantitative content analysis, which, in the case of the Central News included the development of a coding protocol with eight categories and 73 variables to review 128 segments. The selected sample is very limited, and comprehensive and far-reaching conclusions cannot be drawn from it. However, this research can be seen as a supplement to more extensive previously published analyses² and as a brief overview of current reporting models, serving as a basis for discussions on the quality of RTS's news program.

"Dnevnik 2" is the central and most-watched RTS news program, broadcast daily at 7:30 p.m. and lasting 35-40 minutes. The analyzed editions were characterized by low media initiative, pronounced political bias, poor graphic design, and an optimistic tone of reporting. Positive strides were observed in politically non-controversial topics (promotion of healthy lifestyles) and in terms of geographic diversity.

¹ The initial analysis plan was modified in two cases. The show 'Oko' was not aired on October 1 (Tuesday), so instead of analyzing five editions of this show, only four were analyzed. Since there was also no broadcast of 'Takovska 10' on the same day, the first subsequent edition, aired on October 8, was analyzed.

² The organizations BIRODI and the Novi Sad School of Journalism have been conducting monitoring of the news programs of public media services for years.

The analytical segments of the morning program are presented in a dialogical format with an appropriate selection of guests and topics. The format of this segment is inconsistent: sometimes the "Press Review" does not comment on press articles at all, and even when it does, it does not specify which newspapers are being discussed. Viewers can only guess the source based on the font and graphic design. During the observed period, the most frequently commented newspapers were "Politika" and "Večernje Novosti," while "Informer" and "Danas" were each commented on once. Topics discussed included the 100th anniversary of Radio Belgrade and threats to journalists (October 1), Julian Assange (October 2), the war in the Middle East (October 3), children in the online world (October 4), the U.S. presidential elections (October 5), elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina (October 6), and their results (October 7). Of nine interviewees, only one was a woman.

The show "Oko" is broadcast on weekdays at 6:25 p.m. and lasts about half an hour. It sometimes takes the form of a dialogue/debate and sometimes a documentary/report. The first format was used in two analyzed editions (the war in the Middle East, October 2; the results of elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, October 7), while the second format—which stands out for its quality—was also featured in two editions (elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, October 3; the underground city of the Karađorđević dynasty, October 4). Of the 19 interviewees in the analyzed editions, only three were women, all of whom were candidates in the Bosnia and Herzegovina elections.

The discussion/debate show "Takovska 10" is broadcast on Tuesdays at 9:00 p.m. and lasts one hour. In the analyzed edition (October 8), the topic was the war in the Middle East. "Thursday at 9" is also mostly realized in a debate format, but the analyzed edition (October 3) was closer to the documentary format of the show "Oko"; the topic was the protection of children in traffic, and the main participants were parents whose children had died in previous years.

1.3. News Criteria

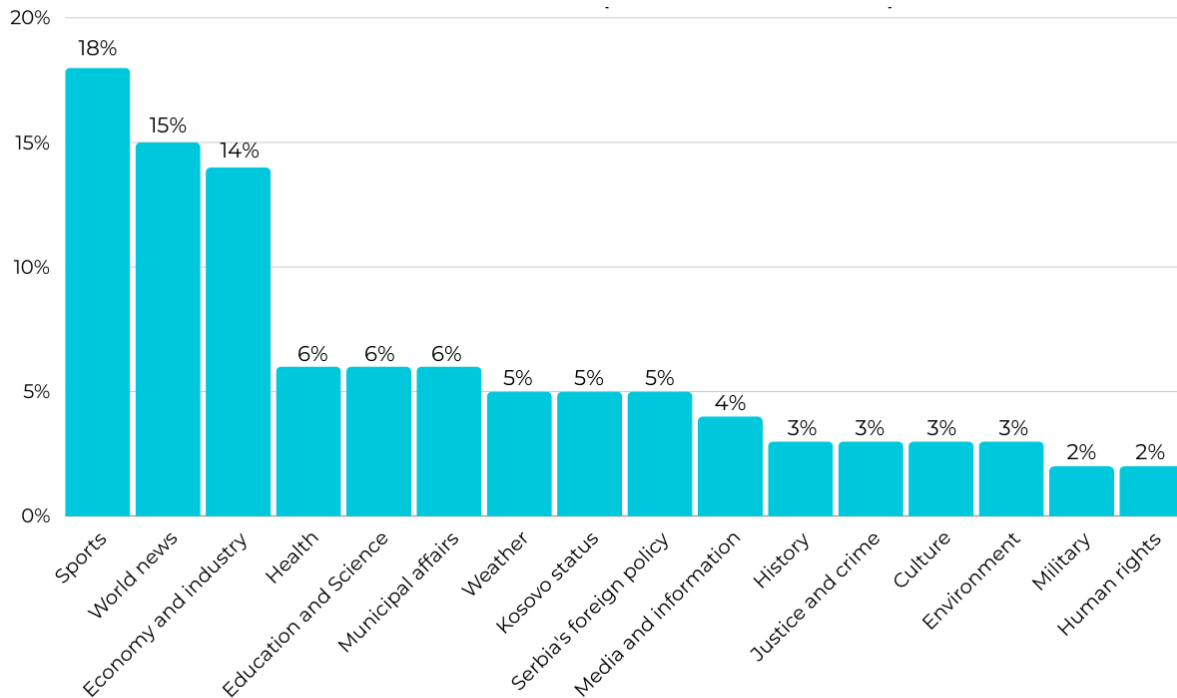
Researchers Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge defined in 1973 a set of factors that determine which events become news. This list—with certain adaptations and modifications—is still used today to assess news program content. The first part of this report will be presented in light of these criteria.

1.3.1. Immediacy

Events that have happened recently are more likely to become news, as they are considered more relevant to the audience. In this sense, the leading topics in the analyzed content were the war in the Middle East, the war in Ukraine, floods, and the

elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Serbia's credit rating increase. The following chart presents the frequency of topics in the Central News.

Chart 1. Representation of topics in "Dnevnik 2"



The aspect of immediacy and priority can also be viewed in the context of directly covering events abroad. These were primarily events attended by the President of Serbia (the anniversary of CERN's founding, and the summit in Hamburg). In addition, RTS sent its reporters to Bosnia and Herzegovina (elections and floods), Germany (Oktoberfest), and Kazakhstan, where a referendum on opening a nuclear power plant was held. The report from Kazakhstan followed multiple statements by the President of Serbia (including during the observed period) indicating that Serbia needed modular nuclear reactors to ensure energy stability. The segment was created in a highly affirmative manner, praising the regularity of the elections and including a survey of two citizens who wholeheartedly supported the opening of the nuclear power plant.³

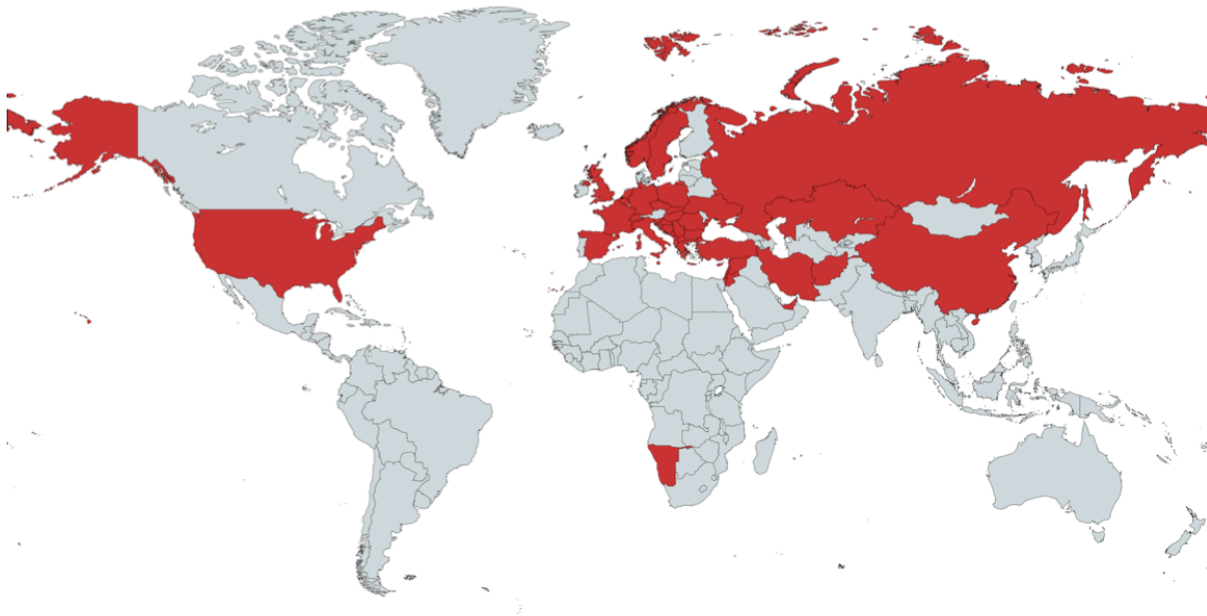
1.3.2. Proximity

Events that are culturally or geographically closer to the audience attract more attention. This was confirmed by the analysis: all neighboring countries were reported on (mostly

³ Statements: 'I am absolutely in favor of building a nuclear power plant because it gives us independence in electricity supply, and it is also the cleanest way to produce electricity.' 'I cast my vote for the future of Kazakhstan, as well as for increased investment and the economy. It will mean a lot to us if we build a nuclear power plant.'

Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as most European countries, global powers, and countries in a state of war. On the other hand—as can be seen from the map of state representation—there was no news or actors from South America or Oceania, while from the African continent, only Namibia was mentioned. Namibia, along with Kazakhstan, was an exception to the expected scope.

Map 1. Representation of countries in "Dnevnik 2"



The proximity criterion is also reflected in the choice of information sources. Although reporting on the war in Ukraine was mostly neutral and succinct, on October 2, the Central News reported that "the bodies of foreign mercenaries were discovered in liberated Vyshneve in the Kharkiv region." The source was not stated, but it was clearly (pro)Russian, as the report referred to the Russian takeover of the Ukrainian settlement as a "liberation."

1.3.3. Magnitude

Major events that affect a large number of people have greater news value, as they are considered important for society as a whole. This factor was consistently applied in covering global events, but not events from Serbia. The lithium excavation topic was reported on very biasedly, favoring the views of government representatives. On several occasions, it was noted that the President of Serbia, as well as the Minister of Finance, became "gatekeepers," dictating topics that RTS then reported on with their public statements. Thus, the Kosovo status topic was inserted into a segment on CERN's 70th anniversary, while the branding of Air Serbia's aircraft (EXPO27 design) allowed the

Minister of Finance to launch multiple topics related to the government's economic successes. Thus, the agenda suggested by government representatives became more important than the magnitude of the event. An exception was the teachers' protests, which received somewhat more coverage.

1.3.4. Frequency

Events that happen frequently or are part of regular cycles are more likely to be covered. In the analyzed program, this was primarily reflected in the sports segment, which—in terms of the number of segments—was the most frequent topic in the Central News. In a similar vein, various pseudo-events were covered, which will be discussed later.

1.3.5. Clarity

Events that are clear and easy to understand have greater news value, while unclear events that require complicated explanations struggle to reach the audience. An illustrative example of this principle could be seen in the show "Takovska 10" (October 8), when the host interrupted guest Srboljub Peović, who was talking about Kahanists in the context of the war in the Middle East, explaining that such details would "confuse viewers." In terms of topics concerning Serbia, it was evident that RTS relied on the explanations provided by the government for interpreting complex events, which also provided space for spreading certain misinformation. However, sometimes the reporting was confusing, inaccurate, or insufficiently supported outside that framework. Such was the previously mentioned case with "liberated" Vyshneve, where it remained unclear who liberated the place and whose foreign mercenaries were involved, as well as the news that Italian authorities did not allow Crvena Zvezda fans to attend matches against Inter and Milan—with no explanation of the reasons behind such a decision. Also notable was the report from Hamburg in the Central News (October 7), where the reporter said that the summit "estimated that the Sustainable Development Goals cost four trillion dollars annually." Other summit reports indicated that this was a translation error: the correct figure was four billion (four with twelve zeros) and not four trillion (four with eighteen zeros). Coverage of more complex topics was not supported by graphic elements, even where graphs and tables could have presented certain patterns and trends more clearly.

1.3.6. Predictability

Expected events such as elections or festivals are more likely to make the media's priority list, and journalists can prepare more easily for them. An RTS journalist reported on the Bosnia and Herzegovina elections for the Central News and "Topic of the Day," and the "Oko" series featured an entire edition dedicated to this topic. The journalist's

approach was balanced, objective, and interesting: she tried to interview relevant interlocutors, explained the election context, used interesting comparisons and report details, and appeared well-prepared. For "Oko," she also reported from Eastern Drvar, which she chose as the smallest municipality in Republika Srpska, as well as Drvar from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a municipality with a Serb majority.

1.3.7. Surprise

Unexpected and surprising events, such as natural disasters or sudden political changes, generally have high news value. During the observed period, RTS had its reporter in Bosnia and Herzegovina covering the floods. Although the reporting included inaccuracies in estimating the number of casualties, it was essentially professional and empathetic.

1.3.8. Continuity

Once an event becomes news, it tends to stay in the media's focus. Besides war developments and elections, continuity was also recorded in two other areas: RTS reported for days on Serbia's increased credit rating as well as on freedom of speech. In the first case, the wave of reporting began with President Vučić's announcement of expected good news, followed by segments presenting the benefits of this event, mainly presented by the Minister of Finance. On the other hand, the topic of media freedom was covered from different angles: from death threats to Tanjug journalists, to the case of Julian Assange, to Reporters Without Borders⁴, in which Arnaud Gouillon's identical statement was repeated twice in the Central News, a statement that Istinomer later found to be false.⁵ In one of the segments on this topic, journalist Ljiljana Smajlović was quoted as saying, "Serbia has become an oasis of media freedom when it comes to war reporting," and the segment concluded with a trivial remark from the reporter that "The media war is as ruthless as the one on the front." Regarding continuity, it was also noted that RTS relied on the same interlocutors multiple times during the observed period: analyst Vojislav Savić spoke three times about the elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Central News, "Oko," "Press Review"), while journalist Momir Turudić ("Oko," "Takovska 10") and Mirko Dautović ("Press Review" and "Takovska 10") both spoke twice about the war in the Middle East.

⁴ The news concerned a Reporters Without Borders report stating that Russia Today 'uses its office in Belgrade to adapt Kremlin narratives, which it then spreads across Southeast Europe.' The report also included an appeal to the European Union to hold Serbia accountable for allowing RT to operate.

⁵ Istinomer, "Reporters Without Borders Refused to Include RTS Bombing Casualties in Their 1999 Report", 15.10.2024., <https://link.crta.rs/s0>

1.3.9. Notable Persons

News involving prominent figures has a greater chance of being covered. The President of Serbia appeared as a key figure every day in the Central News a total of 14 times. Besides events at which he spoke, his greetings were also reported on: to the Jews on their New Year and to Archbishop Ladislav Nemet upon his appointment as Archbishop of Belgrade. On both occasions, the coverage in "Dnevnik" was solely from the perspective of the President's greetings. The Minister of Finance, Siniša Mali, appeared in five out of seven analyzed editions of "Dnevnik," with Prime Minister Miloš Vučević and the President of the Serbian Parliament, Ana Brnabić, also having significant presence. Outside of politics, much space was given to Italian singer Laura Pausini, whose concert was announced in one of the only two interviews broadcast in "Dnevnik" during the observed period.

1.3.10. Personalization

News that focuses on people and their fates has a high chance of being aired if it can evoke emotional reactions from the audience. In the Central News, a report on a major endeavor by Belgrade surgeons—performing a quintuple bypass with minimally invasive techniques—was aired, including a statement from the patient in the hospital bed. Also, an entire edition of the show "Thursday at 9" was dedicated to children who died in traffic accidents. Interviews were conducted with the parents of three children who died, and these parents are now part of a civic association advocating for greater traffic safety. Although their testimonies were very moving, the journalistic approach was professional, respectful, and responsible, avoiding unnecessary sensationalism.

1.3.11. Negativity

Bad news or events with negative outcomes, such as accidents, wars, or crimes, are more likely to be reported. Besides what was previously mentioned about wars and floods, it can be concluded that RTS reports very briefly on negative events in Serbia. Information about the price increase of gasoline, incorrect billing for electricity in Novi Sad, as well as a reminder of the death of two guardsmen (2004), was given very briefly. On the other hand, the appropriate choice of interlocutors contributed to approaching certain controversial topics with more composure and less negativity. For example, in the "Press Review" (October 3), the host quoted the headline from "Informer"—"The World on the Edge of Nuclear War"—to which Mirko Dautović, a guest analyst, replied, "I wouldn't put it that way," and explained why such a statement was exaggerated. Similarly, in the same segment of the "Morning Program" (October 4), child psychiatrist Roberto Grujičić explained without judgment or sensationalism the importance of the internet for children and why they find a certain sense of security in it.

1.3.12. Balance

Media often include stories with positive outcomes or "lighter" news to make the audience feel better. This approach can be observed in RTS in segments related to disease prevention, as well as in an interesting edition of the show "Oko" dedicated to the underground city of the Karađorđević dynasty (October 4).

1.4. Other Important Features of the News Program

1.4.1. Fact-checking

In seven editions of the Central News, several factual errors were observed, sometimes originating from the actors and sometimes directly from the journalists. The previously mentioned cases of "liberation" of Vyshneve in Ukraine and the confusion between trillion and billion have already been noted. Reports on the floods in Bosnia and Herzegovina contained different estimates of the number of casualties: the journalist initially said there were "at least 19" casualties (October 4), but the next day it was reported there were actually 16 due to some citizens being reported missing twice, and then the day after that, the number of casualties was reported to be 20. Reporting on the high-speed railway from Novi Sad to Subotica, the journalist opened the segment with, "A miracle happened a year ahead of schedule, as noted by President Aleksandar Vučić and Chinese Ambassador Li Ming." However, a review of the media archive⁶ shows that previous announcements from "Chinese Railways" and the Government of Serbia had stated that this section would be completed by mid-2018, then by March 15, 2020, and later by mid-2022. The RTS journalist, without any reference to the chronology of these promises, presented the information that the work was being completed "a year ahead of schedule" as credible. In the Central News, the statement by Arnaud Guillon, Director of the Office for Public and Cultural Diplomacy, was repeated two days in a row (October 2 and 3), claiming that Reporters Without Borders "refused to include the deaths of 16 RTS journalists in their annual report in 1999." Istinomer's analysis on October 15 determined that this statement was false and that the journalists' deaths were mentioned in the 2000 report. Pavol Salai, RSF's Head for EU-Balkans, told Istinomer that RSF "was one of the first to clearly condemn the NATO bombing of RTS in 1999."⁷

⁶ Birn, "Slow Construction of the Belgrade–Budapest High-Speed Railway: Millions Paid in Penalties to Russians for Delays and Errors", 3.11.2021., <https://link.crta.rs/s1>; Subotica.com, "Chinese Investors Inspected the Route of the Future High-Speed Railway, Section Novi Sad - Subotica", 24.6.2019., <https://link.crta.rs/s2>

⁷ Istinomer, "Reporters Without Borders Refused to Include RTS Bombing Casualties in Their 1999 Report", 15.10.2024., <https://link.crta.rs/s0>

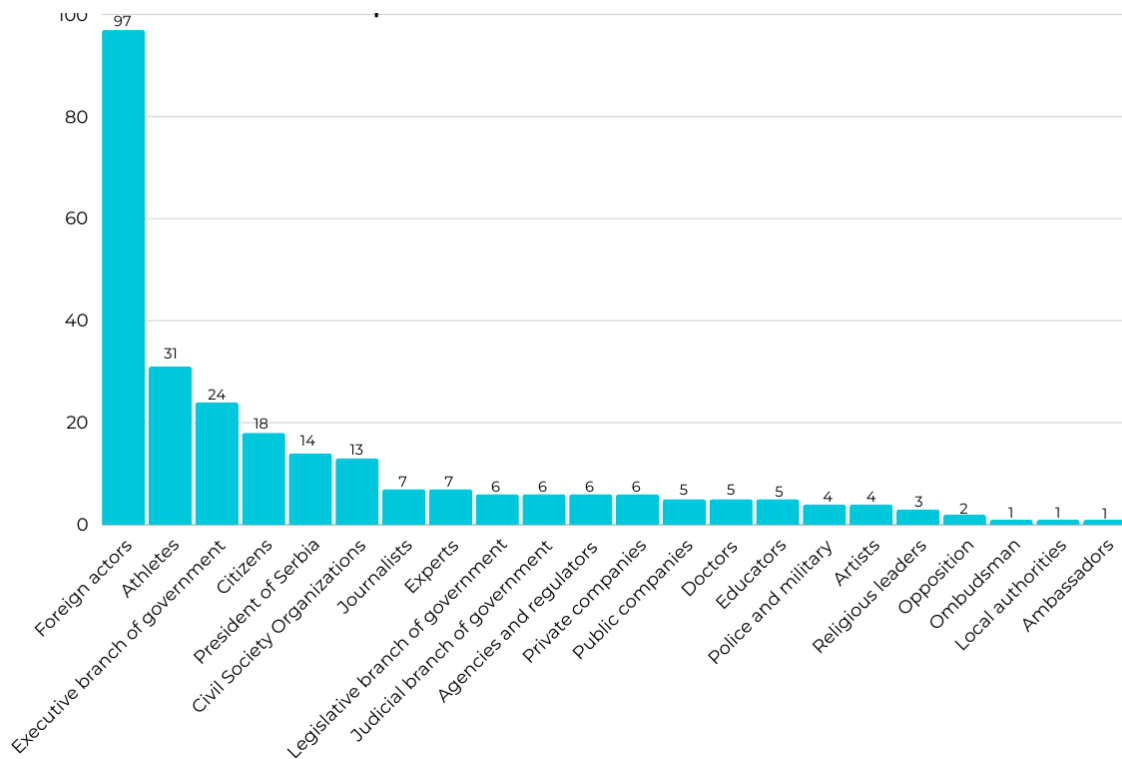
1.4.2. Political Bias

In its main news program during the observed period, RTS openly favored the Serbian Progressive Party in various ways: by covering pseudo-events involving the President and ministers, following their agenda of priority topics, adhering to their interpretations of events, and excluding opposition representatives. This approach to reporting was evident even when the topic was not predominantly political. For example, in a segment about CERN's 70th anniversary, it was reported that Vučić met with about twenty Serbian scientists based in Geneva, but none of their statements were broadcast. On the topic of lithium excavation, on October 4, the Central News, aired a report that environmental activists had invited opposition representatives to Jadar. Although it was visible that opposition politicians attended in the footage, their statements were not included. This was followed by a response from President Vučić lasting 45 seconds. Two days later, it was announced that, at the opposition's suggestion, a proposal to ban lithium and boron mining would be considered. Again, there were no statements from opposition politicians, only statements from the Speaker of Parliament, Ana Brnabić, who called the proposal "unsubstantiated, unsupported, and meaningless." After the session, RTS reported on the debate between the government and the opposition, with the government side represented by the Minister of Mining and Energy, the Speaker of Parliament (both speaking twice), an SNS MP, and an SPS MP, while the opposition was represented by two MPs—Danijela Nestorović and Zoran Lutovac. Quoting the government representatives lasted 126 seconds while quoting the opposition representatives lasted 41 seconds; these 41 seconds were also the only direct space the opposition received during the observed period.

1.4.3. Selection of Actors

In the Central News, the most frequently featured actors were foreign figures, followed by athletes and ministers. The most frequently featured individual was the President of Serbia, who appeared as an actor on average twice per edition.

Chart 2. Representation of actors in "Dnevnik 2"



The selection of guests for dialogical formats was appropriate, with a few exceptions. Although RTS unreservedly promoted the importance of vaccination during the observed period (HPV vaccine, seasonal flu vaccine), in the "Press Review" (October 2), State Secretary of the Ministry of Information Miloš Garić, trying to draw a connection between the Assange case and Novak Đoković, said: "Today, there is a huge risk if you want to deal with the truth, speak the truth, and promote freedom in some way. Let's just remember what happened to Novak Đoković when he refused the vaccine; things can be interpreted like in 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest'—who is crazy here, who is manipulating, and who is fighting for the truth." Although the message was not entirely clear, it could be interpreted as implying that resistance to vaccination is a reflection of freedom and a fight for truth, to which the host did not respond in any way. Secretary Garić also relativized the issue of the frequency of violence against journalists, saying that "certain press associations insist on some theses about vulnerability, and when you ask them to explain exactly what they are talking about, it turns out they do not have enough evidence."⁸ The interview model in dialogical formats was mostly very passive: hosts were informed about the topic, but

⁸ It should be noted that NUNS has been keeping a detailed and publicly available record of attacks on journalists in Serbia for a decade and a half. Last year, 183 attacks were recorded, and this year (until mid-October), 120. Source: <https://link.crtg.rs/s8>.

there were no challenging questions or insistence on answers, even when interviewing political actors such as the Mayor of Banja Luka, Draško Stanivuković.

1.4.4. Gender Perspective

When discussing the representation of women in a particular news program, it is important to differentiate between factors the media can influence and those it cannot, which are related to structural inequalities existing outside the media space. In RTS's Central News men were actors in 79% of cases, and women in 21%. Not only were men more frequently present in fields where they have greater actual representation (such as politics), but they were also more often surveyed and consulted as experts. In the analyzed dialogical formats, a woman appeared as an expert only once, and in sports segments, women's sports results were not reported. In the Central News (October 2), a segment about "Radanska Ruža" as a "social enterprise employing around ten women" was broadcast, but statements from three men and only one woman were shown. In the same edition, there was also a report on "plogging"—a sport combining running and collecting trash. Two men and two women from Serbia were awarded, but statements were only taken from the men. The next day, a report in the Central News covered a quintuple bypass operation, in which one doctor specifically highlighted the role of "experienced doctor Kokotović," but her statement (possibly for justified reasons this time) was also absent. As for gender-sensitive language, it was respected in most cases.⁹ However, this practice was not consistent; in the "Press Review," Paulina Janusz was listed as "an expert in digital marketing," and in the context of elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there were instances of mixed usage—"candidate for mayor" and "candidate for chief."

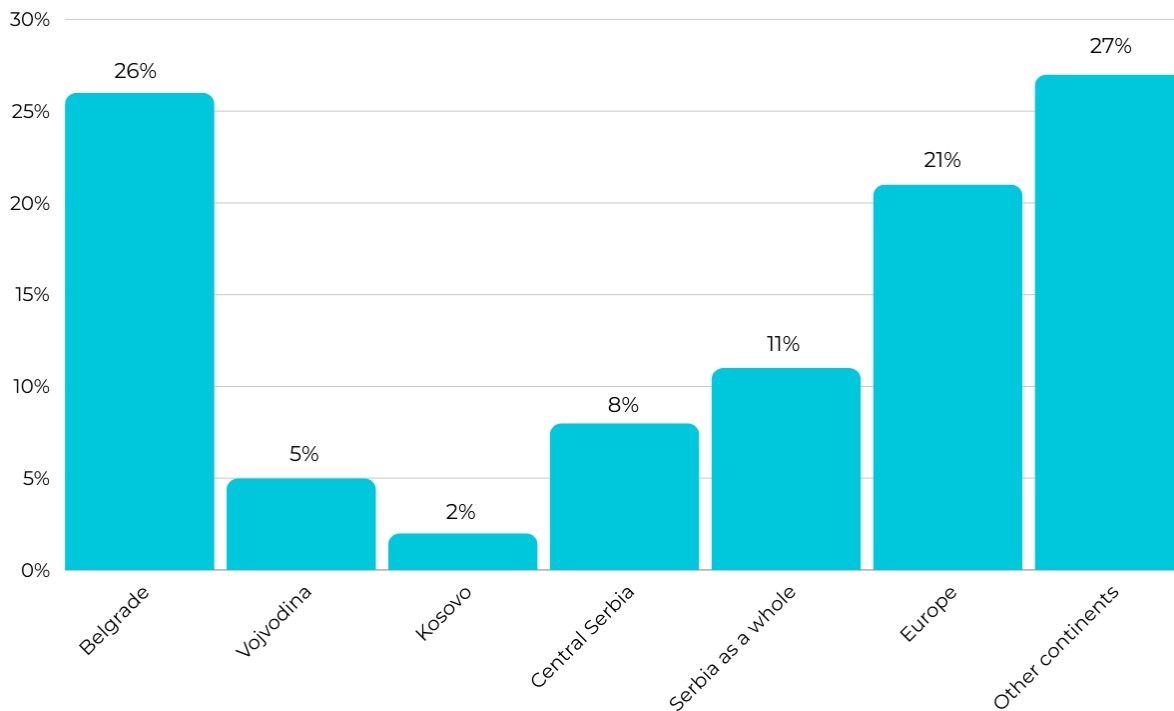
1.4.5. Geographic Perspective

Due to the war in the Middle East, most news was "international." As previously shown on the map, there were reports about most European countries, with Bosnia and Herzegovina being the most frequently mentioned due to elections and floods. In Serbia, the most common location was Belgrade, which was featured as much as all other variables combined.¹⁰ A positive trend was observed where citizens from different parts of the country were shown in broader topics. For example, in a segment about the start of the academic year at universities, information from Vrnjačka Banja and Niš was reported, while in a segment about systematic medical examinations, statements from citizens of Sombor and Vranje were presented.

⁹ Examples: energy analyst, Speaker of Parliament, Minister of Education, music editor, Director of the Torlak Institute.

¹⁰ The variable 'Serbia as a Whole' referred to news that was not tied to a specific location in Serbia, such as information about fuel price increases.

Chart 3. Geographical diversity in "Dnevnik 2"



1.4.6. Genre and Motive for Reporting

In the Central News, a total of 128 segments were broadcast during the observed period. From a genre perspective, reports (43%) and news (37%) were most frequently represented, followed by TV packages (18%), interviews (2%), and self-promotion (1%). In 80% of cases, the reason for reporting was a current event, while pseudo-events accounted for 15%, and media initiatives for 5%. This distribution indicates a passive approach to journalism, with little initiative to open topics of public interest. A typical example of a pseudo-event was the presentation of an airplane branded with the EXPO2027 design and the opening of a 10 km bypass connecting Gornji Milanovac with the "Miloš Veliki" highway. Media initiatives concerned media freedom, parenting, and health topics, and on October 7, on the anniversary of Hamas' attack, RTS aired an interview with the mother and brother of a girl who was kidnapped and killed.

1.4.7. Graphic Design

Regarding the Central News, the graphic design standard of content is extremely low. Except for the sports section and the weather forecast, there are almost no infographics, charts, tables, or other data visualization formats, the absence of which is particularly noticeable in topics requiring numerical comparisons (prices, demographic

data, vaccination rates). Even the names of actors are inconsistently displayed; on October 4, Liu Shaoqian was listed as "генерални директор Power Chinaza Evroaziju," where there was an incorrect merging of words and mixing of Cyrillic and Latin scripts. In the last analyzed edition of the Central News (October 7), the host read an RTS statement regarding posts by "Pištaljka" and "Informer," which were described as false. Not only was the audience not informed of what exactly those two portals had published, but the denial was read without accompanying text, which—given the legal terms, the host's lapsus, and the complex amount mentioned (772,818,580 dinars)—was very difficult to follow. Here, we see that RTS missed an opportunity to make the content more accessible even in a situation directly concerning the reputation of the public broadcaster.

2. LEGAL FORM

According to Article 2 of the Law on Public Media Services, there are two public media services in Serbia: the national public service Radio-Television of Serbia (RTS) and the regional public service Radio-Television of Vojvodina (RTV). The public media service is defined by law as an independent and autonomous legal entity that, through its primary activities, enables the realization of the public interest in the field of public information. Public interest is emphasized in Article 6 of the Law, which provides that, in addition to fulfilling their public interest obligations, public media services are accountable to the public for their activities. The operations of public media services are regulated by principles established in Article 4 of the Law, which also provide a sufficient basis for their independence (editorial independence; independence from sources of funding; prohibition of all forms of censorship and unlawful influence on the work of public broadcasters, editors, and journalists; application of internationally recognized norms and principles, especially respect for human rights, freedoms, and democratic values; adherence to professional standards and codes).

2.1. Organization and Management

To guarantee the institutional independence of public media services, the Law provides for the respect of institutional autonomy, which includes autonomy and independence in the selection of managers, chief editors, and hiring. The Law also defines procedures for the election of management bodies. The main bodies of public media services are the Management Board, the General Director, and the Program Council.

2.1.1. Appointment of members of the main bodies of public media services and their areas of responsibility

The Management Board of public media services is the main governing body, consisting of nine members who have an important oversight role. The members of the Management Board are appointed and dismissed by the Council of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) through a procedure requiring a two-thirds majority vote. The members' term lasts five years, and a person may serve as a member for no more than two consecutive terms.¹¹ The powers and responsibilities of the Board were expanded by the 2014 laws, allowing the body to adopt strategies for the development of public broadcasters, program content concepts, and business plans, monitor financial operations, oversee the transparency of decision-making, and review overall business operations. In exercising its powers, the Management Board can more strictly control the work of the General Director and other persons in managerial positions in public

¹¹ Article 17 of the Law on Public Media Services

broadcasters. Such legal solutions were intended to increase the accountability of the Board.

The General Director represents and manages the public media service, and their responsibilities are operational in nature. According to the Law, the General Director is elected by the Management Board by a two-thirds majority vote for a period of five years, from among candidates who meet all formal requirements for the position.¹²

The Program Council is an advisory body made up of 15 members elected by the Management Board at the proposal of the competent committee of the National Assembly or the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.¹³ The Council's responsibility is to consider the interests of listeners and viewers regarding program content. Accordingly, it is foreseen that at least once a year, the Council organizes a public debate on the quality of program content, which should result in recommendations for the General Director and the Management Board. Although the intention of the legislator to enable citizen participation in the creation of public media services' program content is evident in this way, public debates are not held regularly and have no real impact on the creation of public media services' programs.

2.1.2. Required qualifications

The Law vaguely and imprecisely defines the criteria or qualifications required for individuals to be appointed as members of management bodies.

For the position of a member of the Management Board, individuals must be appointed from among prominent experts in fields relevant to the functions of the body. The specified fields are media, culture, management, law, and finance. An additional requirement for members of the RTV management bodies is that they must work and live in the territory of Vojvodina. The Law also aims to regulate conflicts of interest by stipulating that members of the Management Board cannot hold public or political office or be employed by a media service provider. They cannot provide other services or perform work for the public service. In practice, the REM Council mainly selects social sciences and humanities experts rather than experts from the fields of management, finance, and law. Given the significant role of the Management Board in the organization of public media services and its oversight role over the General Director, the criteria for selecting its members are broadly defined, especially the concept of a "prominent expert." This contributes to the selection of members who may formally come from the prescribed fields but do not substantially qualify as prominent experts. The last member appointed in June 2024 was Filip Rodić, who currently serves as the editor-in-chief of

¹² Articles 23 and 24 of the Law on Public Media Services

¹³ Article 28 of the Law on Public Media Services

the RT Balkan portal and is also engaged with two media outlets favorable to the government—the weekly "Pečat" and the daily "Večernje Novosti."¹⁴

Regarding the General Director, the Law's provision on qualifications is similar. The position may be filled by a "prominent expert" from fields relevant to the functions of the body. However, the Law also defines formal conditions that the candidate must meet, such as being a citizen of the Republic of Serbia, possessing a university degree, and having ten years of experience in managerial positions. Additionally, candidates must submit a work and management program for the public media service for the upcoming period when applying. The current General Director of RTS is Dragan Bujošević, who has an extensive journalism career and meets the formal requirements prescribed by the Law. He was first appointed to this position in 2015. After turning 65 on January 15, 2019, and becoming eligible for retirement, Bujošević's term was extended by six months, after which the Management Board re-elected him for the same position in 2021 for another five-year term. He has faced criticism from both government and opposition representatives. The former accused him of being biased toward the previous government, although he was appointed during the current administration, while the latter criticized him based on media monitoring results showing that government representatives, particularly President Aleksandar Vučić, were significantly more represented than all others.¹⁵

For Program Council members, the Law stipulates that they must be selected from among experts in the media field, media workers, scientists, cultural creators, and representatives of associations aimed at protecting human rights and democracy. Additionally, Program Council members are prohibited from holding public or political office. The current Program Council of RTS was elected in 2022, with Žarko Rakić, former editor-in-chief of the daily "Politika," as its president, and Vladimir Palikuća, a journalist for "Politika," as his deputy.

2.1.3. Appointment, responsibilities, and accountability of chief editors of news programs

Chief editors of news programs in public media services are directly responsible for how these broadcasters report on social and political topics to the public. Although they are not considered the main bodies of the public media service, they are responsible for ensuring that news programs provide timely and impartial reporting on events, individuals, and topics, that ideas and views represented in the community are expressed, and that public debate on issues of interest is encouraged in a spirit of tolerance. Within the organizational structure of public media services, chief editors

¹⁴ Available at the link: <https://link.crt.rs/s4>

¹⁵ Available at the link: <https://link.crt.rs/s5>

report to the General Director and the Management Board. They may be dismissed if they do not perform their duties in accordance with the Law and the Statute if they neglect or irresponsibly carry out their responsibilities, or if their negligent and improper work damages the public media service's reputation. For a chief editor to be dismissed, the General Director must submit a proposal for their dismissal to the Management Board, which then makes the final decision. Management Boards of public media services have not proposed the dismissal of chief editors, nor have they taken steps to dismiss directors who overlook the shortcomings of chief editors. The current chief editor of the RTS news program has held the position since 2004.

2.2. Political independence

Despite the principles provided by law, such as editorial independence, the prohibition of any form of censorship and unlawful influence on the work of public media services, newsrooms, and journalists, as well as institutional autonomy—all confirmed by the statutes of public media services—public allegations of political interference, particularly in the selection of Management Board members, are common.¹⁶

Such interference has been documented on multiple occasions over the years. In 2016, as a result of the selection process for RTS Management Board members, six of the then-eight REM Council members appointed the same nine individuals. Subsequently, during the selection process in 2017, two more Management Board members were appointed, and again in 2021, following several months of delays that led to a disruption in the Board's operations for over three months, six new RTS Management Board members and five RTV Management Board members were appointed. All these processes, including the recent appointment of Filip Rodić in June 2024, were marked by a lack of transparency.

From the given examples, it is evident that REM's political independence and professionalism are crucial for the political independence of the main governing body of public media services and, therefore, their overall operation.

Another potential avenue for political influence over public media services is the large number of employees, whose exact roles and utility remain unclear according to experts. The number of RTS employees has been declining over the years, with 2,619 employees at the end of 2020 and 2,450 employees at the end of 2023. However, there are still concerns that, like other enterprises, RTS serves to secure employment for politically aligned individuals.

¹⁶ Istinomer, 'After One Year, REM Submitted Ballots for RTS Management Board Members,' January 20, 2017, <https://link.crt.rs/12>

2.3. Role of the National Assembly, Government, and other state authorities in the operation of public media services

The role of the National Assembly in relation to public media services is twofold. First, the relevant committee of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia or the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina responsible for public information proposes candidates for the election of Program Council members of the public media service. The relevant committee announces a public call for Program Council members six months before the expiration of the current members' terms. The committee then compiles a list of 30 candidates who meet the requirements and reflect the population structure, which the parliamentary committee submits to the Management Board of the public service.¹⁷ Second, public media services are obliged to submit an annual report on their work and business operations for the previous year to the National Assembly for consideration and decision-making.¹⁸ The National Assembly also plays a role in enacting laws and amendments concerning the budgetary funding of public media services for the following year, as well as determining the fee for public media service provision.

The relationship between public media services and the Government is not formally regulated by law. However, the Government proposes to the National Assembly laws governing the budgetary financing of public media services, including its extension, and determines the amounts allocated for public media services in the budget, as well as amendments to the law setting the fee for public media services.

The relationship between REM and public media services primarily concerns REM's authority to appoint and dismiss members of the RTS and RTV Management Boards. In appointing members, the Regulator's Council announces a public call six months before the expiration of the current members' terms and appoints members who meet the legal criteria by a two-thirds majority vote of the total Council members.¹⁹ Regarding dismissal, the Council decides on the dismissal of a Management Board member for reasons prescribed by law, such as incapacity to perform duties due to illness, if it is determined that incorrect information was provided during appointment, unjustified absence from three sessions in a year, if they take public or political office, are employed by a media service provider, etc., also by a two-thirds majority vote of all Council members.²⁰ In addition to appointing and dismissing Management Board members, the relationship between public media services and the Regulator is reflected

¹⁷ Article 29 of the Law on Public Media Services

¹⁸ Article 51 of the Law on Public Media Services

¹⁹ Article 20 of the Law on Public Media Services

²⁰ Article 21 of the Law on Public Media Services

in the obligation of public media services to submit annual reports on work and business operations to the Assembly and REM for review only.²¹

2.4. Financing of Public Media Services

Stable financing that meets the needs of public media services is emphasized as an important precondition for editorial independence and institutional autonomy. The Law on Public Services provides for several sources of funding, including fees, budget funds, and commercial income.

The primary source of funding for the basic activities of public media services, as stipulated by law, is the collection of fees.²² For 2015, temporary funding from the budget was provided as a transitional solution until a fee collection system was established. However, the temporary nature of this measure turned out to be a more prolonged solution. The funds allocated each year for public media services are determined every December by the Budget Law, but the criteria on which their amounts are based are not predefined. The Government last adopted amendments to the Public Media Services Financing Law in 2023, extending funding for public media services from the Serbian budget until the end of 2024, in the amount of 900 million dinars, along with additional project funding of 203 million dinars, all of which was intended for RTV.

The Law stipulates that the decision on the amount of the fee is made jointly by the Management Boards of RTS and RTV, but the fee cannot exceed 500 dinars. In June 2015, the two Management Boards decided to charge a fee of 500 dinars starting in 2016. This decision was never implemented due to the adoption of the Law on Temporary Regulation of Fee Collection for Public Media Services at the end of 2015. This law allowed the government to take over one of the key responsibilities of the Management Boards and created a model for collecting the fee through household electricity bills. Since 2016, public media services have had regular income from fees. At the time of the law's adoption, the fee was 150 dinars and has gradually increased since then. At the end of July 2024, amendments to the Law set the fee at 349 dinars²³, and revenue distribution between RTS and RTV is such that all revenue outside Vojvodina belongs to RTS, while revenues from taxpayers in Vojvodina are distributed so that 30% belongs to RTS and 70% to RTV. Public media services are required to pay the electricity distributor 3% of the monthly collected income from the fee as a service charge.

²¹ Article 51 of the Law on Public Media Services

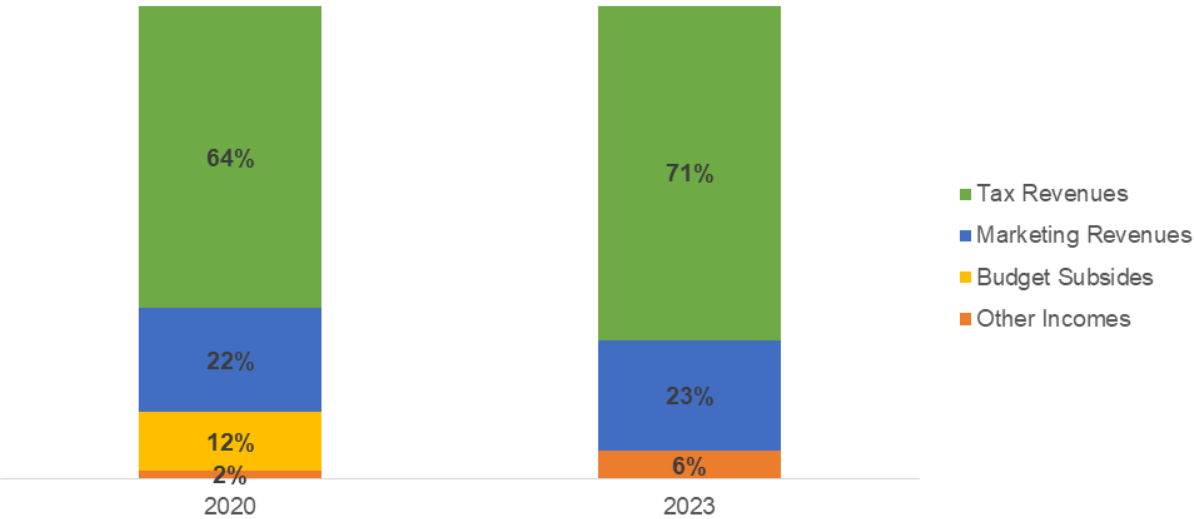
²² A taxpayer is any natural or legal person who is a user of an electricity meter for a residential unit or business space. Taxpayers can be exempt from paying the fee, and RTS has exempted 80,699 citizens from the obligation to pay the fee.

²³ Available at the link: <https://link.crt.rs/s6>

Before the introduction of fee collection through electricity bills, the subscription collection rate was low. From 2003 to 2014, citizens' debt to RTS for unpaid subscriptions reached 500 million euros. These claims are still practically uncollectible. RTS states that court proceedings in this legal matter would be useless because their cost would be much greater than the potentially collected claims.²⁴

Since 2021, although funds have been allocated for public media services in the budget each year, RTS has no longer been funded from the budget, and the entire allocated amount for public media services has been directed to RTV. During the period from 2021 to 2023, RTS achieved continuous increases in total revenue. In 2020, the last year RTS was funded from the budget, the total revenue was 135 billion dinars, and in 2021, this amount increased by 100 million. In 2022, total revenue amounted to 142 billion dinars, which is 600 million dinars more than in 2021, and in 2023, the amount was 147 billion dinars, an increase of 500 million dinars.²⁵ In 2023, 700 million dinars more were generated compared to 2020, the last year RTS was funded from the budget. In the 2023 report, it was stated that 104 billion dinars were generated from public media service fees, 34 billion from marketing and commercial activities, 6 million dinars from financial income, 53 million from other income, and 37 million dinars from earmarked donations. Compared to 2020, income from fee collection and marketing and commercial activities has increased.²⁶

Chart 4: RTS revenue structure in 2020 and 2023



²⁴ RTS, 'Response to the "Objektiv" Editorial: RTS proposed debt write-off, but the law does not allow it,' February 16, 2021, <https://link.crtar.rs/z>

²⁵ According to the Financial Report of RTS for 2023, the total expenses of RTS in 2023, as per the income statement scheme, amounted to 15.1 billion dinars.

²⁶ Available at the link: <https://link.crtar.rs/s7>

Despite the fact that, unlike RTV, which is still funded from the budget, RTS is predominantly funded from fee collection, a certain dependency on RTS still exists, primarily regarding the determination of the fee amount, which is one reason for its favorable attitude towards those in power. In addition, media experts suggest that RTS has always served those in power and that this is something that has never changed, regardless of the regime in power. It can, therefore be concluded that the "autopilot" of RTS is set to an "always pro-government" mode of operation.