

Handbook on Election Reporting in Serbia

Tips and Resources

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1 Introduction

1.1 Why this Handbook?

Media outlets, journalists, and reporters are obligated, both by law and by ethical codes, to serve the public interest. In media terms, the public interest is, in short, ensuring that citizens are able to make important decisions about their lives, their immediate environment, and society as a whole, based on high-quality, comprehensive, timely, and reliable information. Elections and electoral processes in democratic societies are a key arena for direct civic participation in political life. Therefore, the role of the media during election campaigns and electoral activities, along with the post-election period, becomes even more significant.

In addition to giving citizens a realistic, comprehensive, and fact-based insight into the political landscape, including participants in the political process and their platforms and promises, all while maintaining professional and critical distance, quality election reporting brings many other benefits to political and social life. It acts as a kind of school of political literacy: citizens who recognize the importance of political processes and their connection to everyday life become more engaged and more prepared to participate, which is one of the pillars of democracy. By communicating different political viewpoints, the media contribute to inclusive public dialogue, helping to reduce social tensions and conflict while lowering the risk of apathy, political frustration, and extremism. Transparent electoral processes also enhance the legitimacy of political participants and strengthen public trust in institutions. During election campaigns, underrepresented political voices, such as minority, marginalized, or alternative political options, can gain more visibility than usual. This strengthens the diversity of opinions and helps prevent monopolies in the public sphere.

In countries like Serbia, where both domestic and international organizations and institutions have documented numerous electoral irregularities, including political misuse of the media (which often flagrantly violates regulatory and self-regulatory principles), professional and high-quality journalism takes on additional importance. It reduces the space for disinformation, spin, hate speech, and cheap political propaganda. It also plays a key role in monitoring the integrity of the electoral process, encouraging more civic democratic participation. Quality media help citizens recognize irregularities, report them to competent authorities, and to organize themselves to defend the right to free and fair elections.

Professional reporting and media that adhere to legal and professional standards, are particularly important in countries like Serbia, where much of the media landscape is under intense pressure and influence from the authorities, as confirmed by numerous studies. This applies to national, regional, and local media. At all levels, there is a dramatic lack of media diversity, especially

noticeable during pre-election periods. For example, the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) released a staggering statistic: during the pre-election period, representatives of the ruling parties received 94% of media coverage in private media, while opposition representatives received only 6%.

Finally, high-quality and professional reporting benefits the media and journalists themselves. Accurate, impartial, and comprehensive election coverage at a time when public interest in political processes is heightened, strengthens the credibility of a given outlet as a trustworthy source of information. Elections provide the ideal opportunity to demonstrate a newsroom's and its journalists' commitment to regulatory compliance and professional standards.

Journalism, already a complex and demanding profession to begin with, faces additional challenges during election periods. These challenges are defined not only by journalistic ethics, but also by laws and bylaws that further regulate media conduct during elections. The purpose of this handbook is to encourage and assist media professionals to center public interest and societal well-being in their election reporting, while also resolving certain practical dilemmas, providing both theoretical and practical insights. The handbook is methodologically and conceptually based on the "Handbook for Reporting on Elections," published in 2024 by Mediacentar Sarajevo. That publication was the product of years of research and numerous communications with media professionals in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This handbook is intended for both veteran journalists and newcomers alike.

Media environments and electoral/political processes across the region share similar shortcomings, but also have many specific characteristics related to regulatory frameworks and electoral practices. This publication is intended for media professionals in Serbia. The author expresses gratitude to colleagues and experts who helped clarify various issues during the writing of this handbook.

1.2 A Brief Overview of Elections in Serbia

Serbia has six levels of electoral processes in accordance with its constitutional and legal framework. Although they differ in importance, each level is relevant to media professionals and carries specific features. A large number of laws directly or indirectly relate to elections and their media coverage.

Parliamentary elections are held every four years in regular cycles. In these elections, 250 members of the National Assembly of Serbia are elected. The elections use a proportional representation system (the entire country is one electoral unit), and people vote for party lists, not individual candidates. The electoral threshold to enter Parliament is 3%. This threshold does not apply to lists representing national minorities, for which a so-called natural threshold is used.

This natural threshold represents the minimum number of votes needed to gain one mandate. Depending on the total number of valid votes and the number of seats in Parliament, it ranges between 0.35% and 0.4%.

Presidential elections are held regularly every five years. The President is elected using a majority two-round system: if no candidate receives more than 50% of the vote in the first round, a second round is held between the top two candidates. Regardless of voter turnout, the winner of the second round is the candidate who receives the most votes.

Local elections are held to elect members of municipal and city assemblies. For a time, mayors and municipal presidents were elected directly, but following amendments to the Law on Self-Government and the Law on the Capital City, these positions are now elected by local assemblies with a majority vote. These elections also use proportional representation, meaning the entire local government area constitutes a single electoral unit. They are held every four years in regular election cycles.

Provincial elections in Vojvodina elect 120 assembly members and are held using a proportional system with a 3% threshold. Until 2016, a mixed electoral system was used due to the province's unique characteristics (half of the assembly was elected via closed lists with the province as one unit, and the other half through a majority system across 60 electoral districts). Members of the assembly elect the Provincial Government and the President of the Provincial Assembly. These elections are also held every four years, usually alongside parliamentary elections. However, due to the parallel nature and dominance of parliamentary elections, provincial elections tend to be overlooked, partly because of the limited power of the autonomous province.

Elections of the National Minority Councils' Members are governed by a special legal framework defined by the Law on the National Council of National Minorities Law and related acts. Although highly significant for national minority communities, these elections often go unnoticed by mainstream media. National Councils have substantial authority in the areas of education, culture, information, and the official use of the languages and scripts of national minorities. Citizens who voluntarily register in the special voters' list of their minority group have the right to vote and run for office. They are also held every four years and can follow either direct or electoral models, depending on the number of registered voters. Direct elections follow a proportional system with closed lists and are used for larger minority groups. Under the electoral model the National Council is elected by an assembly of electors composed of representatives of the minority community. Associations, organizations, and prominent individuals propose Electors.

Domestic and international organizations and institutions have raised serious concerns about electoral processes at every level in Serbia for many years. According to their assessments,

elections have lost their free and fair nature. The most frequent criticisms include: unequal conditions for electoral competition, media imbalance and biased reporting, voter intimidation and vote-buying, problems with the voter registry, restrictions on election oversight and monitoring, ineffective legal protection, and an inconsistent legal framework.

2 General Professional Standards for Election Reporting

The principles outlined in the Code of Journalists of Serbia take on added importance during election campaigns: media and journalists are key guardians of democracy and the public interest during these periods. For the sake of democracy, citizens, the well-being of society, and the media's own reputation, it is especially important to adhere to professional guidelines that include responsibility, editorial independence, fairness, balance, and impartiality. All laws and by-laws that regulate electoral reporting are aligned with general ethical codes. During elections, it is essential to respect the following principles:

1. Act in the public interest and independently

When creating and presenting media content, be guided solely by the interests of the public, not by the needs of political parties, advertisers, or interest groups. Journalists should resist pressure from media owners if those pressures conflict with the public interest. Independence does not mean indifference to truth, facts, and values, but a refusal to become a tool of political propaganda.

2. Provide citizens with access to authentic, relevant, and credible information

To enable informed decision-making on Election Day, media must offer information that is truthful and comprehensive, reflecting the public's interest and worldviews. Withholding such information is not a neutral act - it equates to disinformation and manipulation.

3. Commit to facts and thorough fact-checking

During campaigns, disinformation, manipulation, and spins increase in prevalence. Professional standards require that media and journalists not only publish verified information, but also respond to disinformation and manipulation by critically pointing them out.

4. Ensure balanced representation of political participants and their views

This does not mean everyone must be given equal airtime, but the criteria for why some participants are more represented than others should be transparent. At the same time, if candidates' statements include disinformation, factual manipulation, or hate speech, journalists are obliged to critically address them.

5. Maintain a professional tone in reporting

Reporting should not inflame passions, divisions, or tensions in society. Journalists must also respect visual ethics, images and video content should not contribute to heightened emotions or deepen social divides.

6. Reject hate speech and incitement against candidates based on identity

Hate speech and inciting hostility against candidates based on ethnicity, nationality, gender, or any other identity are unacceptable. It is also unacceptable to favor or exclude candidates based on religion, ethnicity, disability, age, national origin, or other demographics. Journalists should critically address content from candidates or political entities that spread hate speech, and point out when other media or journalists use hate speech or discrimination in their reporting.

7. Go beyond simply relaying statements

The media's role is not just to relay statements or report on events, but to critically examine candidates' positions, political processes, and personalities in terms of credibility. However, audiences must never be misled: there must always be a clear distinction between facts and opinions, analysis, speculation, or commentary.

8. Refrain from participating in political parties or campaigns

Media and journalists must not publish content that is presented as independent journalism but is actually covert political advertising.

9. Clearly distinguish campaign and paid content from independent journalism

Media should transparently separate election campaign materials and paid programming from genuine independent journalistic reports, ensuring that the audience can easily identify the nature and source of the content they consume.

10. Broaden media content by including independent experts, civil society representatives, analysts, and citizens

When producing *vox populi* (the voice of the people) content, present citizens' opinions accurately and authentically.

11. Respect the right to reply and correction in line with professional and legal standards

Political parties should be given sufficient time and opportunity to respond to media content concerning them. However, this right must not be abused for voter manipulation or political retaliation. Media are not obligated to publish a reply or correction unless it factually disproves the original claim.

3 Regulatory Framework for Media in Serbia

The regulatory framework for media in Serbia in the context of the electoral process is based on general media and election laws, as well as other direct or indirect regulations on media behavior during the campaign and on voting day. Experts describe this framework as unnecessarily complex, encompassing both the electoral processes themselves and their media coverage. The regulations are largely aligned with European standards and aim to ensure all participants in the process receive fair and equal media treatment, as well as to protect citizens' rights to truthful, impartial, and complete information. However, in practice the outcome is often quite different.

Key oversight institutions for media reporting during elections include the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), the Anti-Corruption Agency, and the Election Campaign Supervisory Board (a body appointed by the National Assembly), which are responsible, among other things, for supervising public service media during the campaign.

Unfortunately, in reality these institutions tend to be passive and enforce legal norms selectively, or not at all — seriously undermining the integrity of the electoral process and the media environment. Some media outlets flagrantly and openly violate regulations during election periods yet remain unpunished. These media are typically within the orbit of government influence. These challenges are directly linked to issues of institutional capture, a crisis of the rule of law, and media freedoms in Serbia, as highlighted by numerous reports from domestic and international organizations and institutions.

The regulatory framework sets detailed and precisely defined obligations for public service media (Radio Television of Serbia and Radio Television of Vojvodina) during election campaigns, for private electronic media (radio and TV stations), and to a lesser extent for print and online media.

Relevant legal acts include media laws, such as the Law on Public Information and Media, the Law on Electronic Media, and Law on the Public Service Broadcaster, as well as electoral laws (primarily the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament, whose provisions also apply to other election laws), the Law on the Prevention of Corruption, the Law on the Financing of

Political Activities, the Law on the National Councils of National Minorities, the Law on Local Self-Government, and subordinate acts such as those issued by REM.

3.1 Rules Applicable to All Media

The main media law, the Law on Public Information and Media, obliges media outlets to promote the values of democratic society, to provide truthful, timely, credible, and complete information to citizens, to avoid hate speech, and to promote human and minority rights. The law fundamentally protects media diversity and prevents monopolies in the public information sphere. These provisions apply at all times, including during election campaigns.

When it comes to electoral processes, the law particularly regulates the right to reply and the right to correction (retraction). Outside election campaigns, editors-in-chief must publish replies, replies based on court rulings (following lawsuits demanding corrections), and retractions no later than in the second subsequent issue of daily newspapers or in the second subsequent daily broadcast after receiving the reply. During election campaigns, this deadline is shortened: replies and corrections must be published in the very next issue or broadcast.

Both during and outside election campaigns, editors-in-chief are not obliged to publish a reply if it does not relate to the information presented, or if the information subject to the reply is not clearly identified. Replies are also not published if they are reacting to opinions rather than facts, contain opinions instead of factual statements, or under other circumstances prescribed by law.

The Law on the Election of Members of Parliament contains a specific article on election information, which is also applicable to the Laws on Local and Presidential Elections. It highlights citizens' rights to be informed about electoral programs and activities of candidates and electoral lists according to rules regulating public service media and electronic media. It also reiterates the obligation of media service providers to ensure non-discriminatory representation of all election participants during the campaign.

All media registered in the Media Registry must observe electoral silence. Starting 48 hours before and continuing through Election Day until polling stations close, it is prohibited to publish election result estimates, present candidates or their programs, or to call voters to vote or not vote for specific lists or candidates.

The Law on the Prevention of Corruption is relevant to media and electoral processes regarding the prevention of official campaigns and the misuse of public resources for campaign activities. The Anti-Corruption Agency is responsible for preventing and sanctioning the misuse of public resources for the promotion of political parties or election candidates, with particular attention to election campaigns.

Public funds may not be used to pay for voter and membership work, organization and holding of rallies and promotions, production and distribution of campaign materials, political advertising, public opinion research, or media, marketing, and consulting services. These prohibitions are also emphasized in the Law on the Financing of Political Activities.

Additionally, the Agency must prevent and sanction public officials who use official gatherings or meetings, held in their capacity as public officials, for (media) promotion of political parties or election candidates.

3.2 Regulatory Framework for Public Service Media

The Law on Public Service Broadcasting imposes specific obligations on public service broadcasters, namely Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) and Radio Television of Vojvodina (RTV), during the electoral process to ensure balanced, objective, and impartial information circulation. These obligations stem from their status as public institutions funded by public resources, carrying significant responsibility towards citizens. The law requires public service media to operate in accordance with the public interest and the needs of citizens as opposed to political or interest groups, especially during campaigns.

The Republic Authority for Electronic Media (REM) and the Election Campaign Supervisory Board oversee the work of public service media during the electoral process. The latter monitors political parties, participants, electoral lists, and public service media during election activities.

According to the law, public service media must inform citizens impartially, objectively, truthfully, and comprehensively. During election campaigns, this means reporting without favoring any political participants and providing free, equitable, and proportional representation to all election participants in news programs, especially specialized shows covering elections at the national, provincial, local, and minority levels. Governing boards and programming councils must guarantee the independence and editorial autonomy of public services.

Public media must also organize debates, round tables, and interviews in which all election participants have an equal opportunity to participate. They are required to record and report the air-time allocated to each political candidate, particularly in news programs, political shows, informational segments, and advertising blocks.

The Law on the Election of Members of Parliament, whose provisions also apply to other electoral laws, stipulates additional obligations. Participants and electoral lists have the right to free and equal representation in public service media programs, which must provide all election participants with an impartial, proper, and balanced representation of electoral programs, free of charge and without discrimination.

The law also mandates that two representatives each from RTS, the government, and political parties holding parliamentary seats agree on rules for representing electoral lists, including the number and length of programs on public service media. This agreement must be concluded within five days of the election call. The Election Campaign Supervisory Board monitors compliance with this agreement during the election.

In 2024, REM adopted a Rulebook on the Manner of Fulfillment of Media Service Providers' Obligations During Election Campaigns, which broadly applies to all electronic media without exception. This replaced previous rulebooks related to public service media and recommendations for commercial providers about conduct during campaigns.

A key specificity of public service media, compared to other electronic media, is their duty to broadcast all electoral lists, participants, and nominees free of charge and to comply with the agreement foreseen in the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament.

3.3 Regulatory Framework for Commercial and Civil Society Electronic Broadcasters

Aside from the two public service broadcasters, all other Serbian media are either commercial (privately owned) or founded by civil society organizations. The key law defining the status and obligations of electronic media is the Law on Electronic Media (LEM), with REM as the primary institution responsible for its enforcement and oversight of media compliance during elections.

LEM aims to promote democratic values, ensure the free flow of information, freedom of speech, media and political diversity, and constitutional and legal rights of citizens. By law, REM must include monitoring of electronic media's legal obligations during election campaigns in its annual supervision plans and respond to violations, whether accidental or intentional.

LEM sets out obligations for all electronic media during election campaigns, such as prohibiting political advertising outside election campaigns. Media must publicly disclose tariffs and conditions for political advertising before campaigns start. Media may choose whether to broadcast political advertisements during campaigns; however, if they do, prices and conditions must be equal for all candidates and electoral lists.

During the campaign, electronic media must provide all political participants with non-discriminatory representation in pre-election programming and clearly label such programming. The law forbids covert promotion of political programs disguised as news, entertainment, or other content.

Media providers must disclose detailed information when publishing public opinion poll results: who commissioned and paid for the poll, the organization conducting it, methodology, sample size, margin of error, and the date or period of the poll.

The ban on public official campaigns applies starting 30 days before Election Day. During this period, electronic media cannot report on official public events marking infrastructure openings or similar events if they are attended by public officials who are candidates in the upcoming elections.

REM's on the Manner of Fulfilment of Media Service Providers' Obligations During Election Campaigns further defines election-related obligations of electronic media. It requires clear separation of pre-election programs from other content by sound and image (intro/outro) and visible labeling during the whole broadcast. Pre-election content must not air during, or 10 minutes before or after, children's programming. Political ads cannot be broadcast alongside other commercial ads or during central news programs. Electoral silence is defined as starting 48 hours before Election Day until polls close, prohibiting certain types of reporting, though reporting on voter turnout and atmosphere at polling stations is allowed.

The rulebook bans covert or indirect promotion of candidates or lists and reporting that privileges government representatives or officials over other election participants. Officials or candidates cannot appear during campaigns as presenters, reporters, or similar roles, regardless of program type.

Media providers must ensure non-discriminatory representation of political parties, coalitions, and candidates, providing truthful, objective, timely, and diverse reporting. The rulebook reiterates bans on official campaigns and negative campaigning against other candidates.

Electronic media may label election results as official only when announced by competent authorities; other sources must be marked as unofficial. The rulebook also incorporates LEM provisions on how public opinion poll results are presented in election contexts.

All electronic media, including civil society broadcasters, must adhere to the agreement defined by the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament when representing candidates or lists. They must timely publish advertising tariffs and ensure equal access to political advertising. If demand exceeds available slots, ad time must be evenly distributed among interested parties under equal technical and financial conditions.

These provisions also apply to media coverage of a referendum announced by relevant authorities.

Despite these clear regulations for private and civil society electronic media, domestic and international organizations criticize REM for failing to enforce sanctions against violating media or doing so selectively and ineffectively.

3.4 Regulatory Framework for Print and Online Media

Beyond the general regulations applicable to all media, there are no additional specific laws or regulations for print and online media during elections. Print and online media must observe electoral silence and are prohibited from receiving public funds for covering election campaigns or promoting electoral participants. They are also indirectly obliged to avoid reporting on events that could be considered part of an incumbency campaign. Naturally, they are also required to comply with general media laws.

The Press Council, a self-regulatory body supported by relevant journalist associations, media organizations, and the civil sector, oversees the application of the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics, most provisions of which apply to election reporting. Those who feel wronged by print or online media election coverage can file complaints with the Press Council's Complaints Commission, either personally, through representatives with consent, or by commission members noticing serious breaches of ethical standards. While the Council's decisions are not legally binding, they carry ethical, professional, and public weight.

3.5 Elections for National Minority Councils and Local Community Councils

The Law on National Councils of National Minorities states that media must report on elections for these councils in line with existing public information and election laws, meaning all previously mentioned regulations apply.

Public service media offer programming or editorial content in the languages of minorities. The election rules applying to public services also apply to coverage of national minority council elections. There are also private or civil society electronic media in minority languages that are subject to LEM and REM regulations. Special legal status applies primarily to print and online media partially founded by national minority councils.

Given the sensitivity and importance of minority rights, media are expected to demonstrate greater responsibility, diversity, and professionalism and to proactively inform minority communities about their voting rights.

Reporting on elections for local community councils is not specifically regulated by law or subordinate acts, except for certain rules in local self-government statutes. Therefore, only general media laws apply to this reporting.

4 Tips and Guidelines for Election Reporting

The political scene in Serbia is extremely turbulent and full of challenges for media professionals. Elections at all levels attract great public attention and numerous controversies. Besides the fact that there are six levels of electoral processes, elections are frequent due to the many extraordinary elections held in the last decade for members of the National Assembly of Serbia. Journalists and media worldwide face numerous professional dilemmas while reporting on elections. In countries characterized by political crises and tensions, institutional inefficiency, numerous electoral irregularities, low levels of media professionalism, and the endangered safety of journalists, these dilemmas are even more pronounced and important to resolve in accordance with media and electoral legislation, professional ethics, and public interest.

This section of the handbook offers concrete recommendations and guidelines on how editorial offices can prepare in time for election reporting, how to define internal rules, establish an electoral calendar, act in cases of misuse of incumbency positions and electoral irregularities, monitor the campaign process, and how to protect their own safety from the initial election announcement to publication of its results. These recommendations aim to enable citizens to vote based on quality and comprehensive information.

4.1 Beginning of the Election Period

Media preparation for electoral processes should actually begin before the elections are officially announced, or at the latest soon after their announcement. Editors and journalists should develop internal acts/policies for media election coverage, agree on task distribution, prepare a contact database of political participants, an internal election calendar, thematic priorities, graphic templates, and potential topics for coverage.

Tip 1: Establish clear internal rules and publish them

Registered media in Serbia are required to develop a set of internal rules/acts/policies to be submitted to the Registrar (Business Registers Agency), relating to the protection of editorial independence, establishment of gender equality, protection of people with disabilities, and safety of journalists. According to recommendations from journalistic and media associations, these documents should be public, i.e., published on media portals. Internal acts can be amended according to transitional provisions and are an ideal opportunity to include at least basic rules concerning the important topic of election coverage.

Based on basic rules, an internal act should be agreed upon in the pre-election period that elaborates and specifies reporting rules for particular elections from the moment they are announced. It is understood that these rules should comply with laws and other relevant

regulations, the Serbian Journalists' Code, as well as good media practice respecting the public interest. They can preemptively resolve doubts that editorial teams encountered in previous election cycles. It is very important that these rules are accessible to all employees and collaborators. Ideally they should be adopted through an inclusive process involving many members of the editorial staff, possibly representatives of civil society, and external experts. This is an excellent way to eliminate room for different interpretations through dialogue. In larger editorial offices, it is advisable to hold internal training about election rules for the media.

It is best practice that internal election coverage rules be published on the media's website and sent to political entities participating in the elections. It is also possible to publish and send a shortened version, omitting parts considered business secrets.

Internal rules should regulate important media-election phenomena, such as paid political advertising, handling of press releases, coverage of press conferences, rallies, and other events organized by election participants, treatment of content from social networks, rules for employees and collaborators regarding their social media engagement, the possibility of journalists' involvement in political campaigns, and issues concerning journalist safety during election reporting. Special attention should be paid to specific elections, such as those for national minority councils and local community councils.

Tip 2: Paid political advertising and pre-election content

Internal rules should specify the approach to political advertising during the election campaign. Media may decide whether to offer political advertising space/time at all. If they decide to offer such space to election participants, electronic media must adhere to legal provisions and regulations (REM), which stipulate:

- (1) Before the start of the election campaign, publicly announce tariffs and conditions for political advertising valid for all election participants.
- (2) Ensure equal access to advertising for all.
- (3) If there are more interested parties and technical conditions prevent all from being accommodated, fairly provide space/time to all participants under equal conditions.

Ideally these legal provisions should be detailed in internal rules/acts/policies, e.g., how much space/time the media allocates for political advertising, accompanying price lists, and defining advertising subjects. Advertising subjects should be election list submitters or specific candidates in majority elections (presidential elections). Defining the time-space framework and subjects is also important for free pre-election program appearances.

Besides legal and subordinate regulations on political advertising and pre-election programming, which require clear separation of such content from other programming and ban advertising during central news programs and election silence, media should formulate additional rules, such as payment methods. It is recommended that ad payments be made at least 24 hours before airing/publication and apply uniformly.

The importance of these measures lies in preventing misunderstandings. For example, candidates from the same political party may contact you individually, not understanding that space/time limits apply per political party, not per candidate. Though not legally obliged, printed and online media should respect these rules as well.

ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE FOR EASIER WORK: We recommend that all editorial offices capable of doing so appoint a point of contact responsible for correspondence with political entities. Along with sending your internal rules to political entities, be sure to specify the contact person's full name and contact information. This will facilitate communication between your media house and political entities and support your editorial work.

Tip 3: Political entity press releases

No media outlet is obligated to publish every press release from a political party. Editorial offices should define rules for publication, whether to publish releases in full, to process them into thematic articles, and which criteria must be met (e.g., relevance to public interest, importance for the local community, etc.). A decision can be made to generally not publish press releases apart from exceptional cases. In any case, it is recommended that press releases not be published in full but with editorial processing. Releases from different political entities on the same topic can be published together in one media content while respecting equality. It is recommended that opinions of independent participants, experts, civil society representatives, and relevant institutions also be included. Press releases should only serve as a trigger for further journalistic work.

Posts containing hate speech, discrimination, sexism, or defamation should not be published, even if they are legally compliant. Public service media have a special obligation to inform about all election aspects while maintaining editorial independence regarding political participants' press releases.

Tip 4: Media conferences and political rallies

Private media may independently decide which events and conferences organized by election participants to cover. However, if they decide to cover one candidate's event, they must treat other election participants the same way. Electronic media have a legal obligation to ensure equal representation of all political participants without favoritism. Print and online media should

also follow these rules for professional dignity reasons. It is recommended to report critically and thematically on topics from political gatherings, including statements from multiple sides, expert opinions, citizens, and relevant institutions.

Tip 5: Social media as a source

Editorial offices should establish internal rules on how to use content from political entities' social media accounts. Media are not obliged to monitor and relay all posts. Private accounts of candidates should be distinguished from official party accounts. As with the other measures outlined above, all of this should be defined internally. Social media posts can be a good source of topics for further research and reporting.

Tip 6: Journalists' involvement in campaigns

Internal rules should clearly state that, according to the Serbian Journalists' Code, journalists' participation in election campaigns and events organized by election participants is incompatible with their journalistic/editorial roles. However, internal acts/policies can further define this, e.g., allowing journalists to moderate debates involving multiple political participants or experts, even if organized by election participants. These rules help resolve dilemmas and prevent misunderstandings in advance. Colleagues will know if they can or cannot expect additional income and under what conditions, while preventing the media outlet's association with particular political entities. Direct electoral engagement by journalists is prohibited and incompatible with journalistic/editorial positions.

Tip 7: Journalists on social media

The private social media accounts of editors, employees, and collaborators is a major global media issue, and especially important during elections. While everyone has the right to express opinions, including political ones, media credibility may be questioned if individuals are directly linked to the media outlet on social media. This issue can also be resolved through internal rules/acts/policies.

Tip 8: Use of artificial intelligence

Use of artificial intelligence (AI) during the election period is, of course, permitted. AI can help obtain information faster, present and contextualize it in an attractive way, and is useful for creating graphic solutions, transcription, and text-to-audio conversion. Use of AI must comply with general and specific ethical rules. Content created with AI must be strictly verified, truthful, accurate, unbiased, and respect principles of non-discrimination, responsibility, and privacy.

If AI systems are used, the media should take measures to ensure sufficient AI literacy among employees and collaborators, considering their technical knowledge, experience, education,

training, and the context of the AI's use. Decision-making must be human-controlled, not AI-controlled, both for long-term strategies and daily editorial policy. AI use must be transparent, with the content created with AI, the platform used, and reasons for use clearly indicated. Other AI use cases (e.g., audience interaction, chatbots, virtual assistants, algorithmic comment moderation) must also be transparent and clearly marked.

Tip 9: Journalist safety

There are many examples of threats to journalists' safety during elections in Serbia, ranging from public targeting of unfavorable media to physical attacks. It would be desirable for internal rules/acts/policies to address this adequately, establishing clear rules for journalists reporting from the field on how to avoid risky situations. If safety is threatened, mechanisms must be established for reporting to competent authorities via contact points in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Prosecutor's Office through the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists, as well as journalist and media associations. If informing the public does not increase risk for the endangered person, the media should notify other media about the attack, calling for solidarity and public awareness. Journalists should also have clear visibility when reporting from large gatherings or polling stations, e.g., wearing PRESS vests. Media should report on safety threats to journalists and collaborators from other outlets in solidarity.

Mainstream media often ignore elections for national minority councils, treating them as niche concerns rather than matters of wider public interest. This is discriminatory, at least because minority members are also part of your audience. The position of minority communities and the realization of rights of non-majority citizens is a clear public interest topic, considering the important competencies and social roles of minority councils.

Media and journalists should approach these elections carefully, informatively, and responsibly. Internal rules can insist on journalistic approaches from minority rights perspectives, emphasizing the role of councils in preserving minority languages, culture, education, and identity. Due to the complexity of these elections, citizens should be informed of their procedures. Avoid stereotypes and ethnic prejudices, and promote political and ideological diversity within minority communities. Whenever possible, publish bilingual or multilingual content and collaborate with minority media, organizations, and experts.

Elections for local community councils have increasing political and social importance. Should the editorial capacity exist, it is important to cover this lowest level of elections. This includes explaining the significance of local communities as a form of direct citizen participation, detailing their legal framework, competencies, and procedures, and warning about political influence and the misuse of these institutions by political parties. Promote initiatives coming "from below."

Tip 11: Start early and distribute tasks

The key to a job well done lies in good organization. This leads to task and responsibility distribution within editorial offices during the election period, which should be addressed immediately after election announcement, or earlier if possible. There are no universal standards for organizing work applicable to all media, so distribution should fit your editorial office size, type, and other specifics. It is important that all involved in election coverage know the legal obligations, internal media rules, election laws, and regulations. Prepare an election calendar, listing key electoral process points. Assign a person to create contact lists, references, graphic materials, and topics. We already mentioned appointing a person responsible for communication with political entities about paid advertising or pre-election programs. This same person could also handle other communication matters. Transparency in communication is vital. If relevant, assign someone to communicate with REM or the Press Council, and with all competent institutions (the Republic Electoral Commission, Election Campaign Monitoring Board, Anti-Corruption Agency). All media should have a person responsible for website administration and social media accounts. Assign an editor responsible for election content who will have final responsibility for content selection. Form teams or designate individuals for daily reporting, analytical content (e.g., campaign financing, statistics, promises vs. implementation), and possibly fact-checking if capacities allow. There is no need to unify styles but it should be insisted upon that all content be accurate, fact-based, verified, objective, and aligned with professional standards and public interest.

Tip 12: Create a contact list

Create an email list and contact directory of political entities registered as election participants. Identify the most relevant points of contact within political entities. If unclear, insist they delegate one contact person and a substitute. If your primary audience is regional or local, create a contact list for political entities on that level. The contact list will facilitate work and communication throughout the election campaign. It can also be used proactively to offer your media space for sale during the election period when paid political advertising is allowed.

Tip 13: Create an election calendar

An election calendar will help your work; it acts as a checklist and a great reminder. It lists important dates (election announcement day, candidate registration deadline, campaign start and end, start of election silence, Election Day, results announcement, potential runoff or appeals). The calendar should define key media obligations and responsibilities of teams or individuals. It is advisable to make the calendar accessible to all editorial staff and post it prominently. This reduces the risk of errors, whether they be material, technical or legal, and keeps everyone informed on election process progress to plan work and resources accordingly.

Tip 14: Create a list of resources, institutions, organizations, and individuals

Creating a list of resources, institutions, organizations and individuals can involve the entire editorial office. Assign one person to create an initial list for others to add to. The list should include election authorities such as the REM, Republic Electoral Commission, Anti-Corruption Agency, Election Campaign Monitoring Board; active election organizations like CRTA, Transparency Serbia, BIRODI; research centers to assist with professional doubts; experts such as political scientists, sociologists, lawyers, communication specialists, economists, and human and minority rights experts; institutions like the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Prosecutor’s Office, courts of competent jurisdiction, Permanent Working Group for Safety of Journalists; relevant laws, research, and past election data.

This database enhances access to sources, especially when time-constrained, facilitates creation of articles, analyses, and thematic content, and helps verify information validity. Pay special attention to international contacts for comparative analyses of how challenges are resolved in Europe or the region. Local elections and community council elections should have contact lists of local organizations or activists, which can be excellent information sources. For national minority council elections, include the contacts for experts and public figures from the respective minority group, as well as organizations specializing in minority rights.

Tip 15: Create graphic solutions

Prepared graphic solutions help journalists report more efficiently, creatively, and attractively. Create templates that are easy to edit and adapt for various reporting formats. Prepare graphics for tables, statistics, relations, illustrations, infographics, and mandate distribution comparisons tailored to your media type and editorial standards. Developing such tools is not only time and cost-effective but highly impactful. Combining tools improves creativity, dynamic, and audience appeal in the reporting. Graphics should be legible on mobile devices, accessible to visually impaired people (contrast, font size), consistent across platforms (website, TV, social media, print), and aligned with the media’s visual identity, but distinct enough to highlight the election campaign as a separate unit.

Tip 16: Prepare a list of topics

Political participants try to impose topics important to them and areas where they feel superior. Media and journalists should impose topics of public interest that genuinely concern citizens. It is important to prepare a list of topics for coverage. Do not let politicians impose topics; you represent the citizens and should impose topics on them. For local elections, consider important topics for your local community, go out and ask citizens what matters to them. Communication with citizens can model topic selection for higher-level elections. Web and social media platforms

can allow citizens to suggest election reporting topics. During this period, prepare features explaining the upcoming elections and why they matter.

4.2 Elections Announcement

The complex structure of election processes in Serbia poses a significant challenge for media reporting, especially considering the limited capacities of media outlets. An even greater challenge is that elections at different levels are held simultaneously, which leads to some election processes being undeservedly overshadowed by others. Parliamentary and presidential elections are in the public focus.

Calling elections also marks the beginning of the election campaign, which lasts until the day the election silence begins. A campaign by public officials is prohibited 30 days before the voting day. The election campaign involves a significant increase in public statements, appearances of candidates at various events, but also abuses of office and the numerous electoral irregularities discussed earlier.

This chapter offers advice on how to report during the election campaign period, what to watch out for regarding campaigning by public officials and other electoral irregularities, what is allowed and what is not during this period, and the most common mistakes journalists make and how to avoid them.

Tip 17: Watch out for political advertising and electoral irregularities

Political advertising in electronic media is prohibited before the official election campaign begins. This includes advertisements, public calls, video clips/commercials, and any other video forms of political subject promotion. Outside the campaign, political parties may freely communicate, publish, and organize events through other channels but cannot buy TV or radio advertising slots. The ban on political advertising outside the campaign does not apply to print and online media, which is a legal gray area previously pointed out by experts. In any case, political advertising content must be clearly marked and separated from independent journalistic content. During the campaign, be vigilant about hidden political advertising and abuse of public space through misuse of public functions. Domestic and international organizations point out numerous irregularities typical for the pre-election period: besides campaigns by public officials, there are pressures on voters, media inequality, etc. As guardians of democracy and public interest, media must not only comply with legal and ethical standards but also react to electoral irregularities. Also, be careful about the exploitation of minors in pre-election campaigns. Media should refuse to report on events involving such exploitation and strongly criticize it.

Tip 18: Pay attention to campaigns by public officials

The Anti-Corruption Agency is required to prevent and sanction public officials who use public gatherings or meetings held in their capacity as officials for (media) promotion of political parties or electoral subjects. This is known as the campaign by public officials, which is prohibited in Serbia 30 days before Election Day. Media should pay attention to this phenomenon even before the legal ban, as it still represents misuse of public office through the increased media presence of candidates. Election lists always include party or coalition members who hold executive or legislative functions and have access to resources and media. Such candidates often use their regular official activities to campaign and increase media presence by visiting institutions, civil society organizations, charity groups, overseeing street reconstructions, or enabling new street lights. Continuous use of public resources for political promotion is legally banned. Media should approach reporting on such events cautiously and critically, focusing on citizens' interests, not officials. For example, reporting how long it took to repair a street and why exactly it happened now is one of the ways of reporting these issues. Budgets often reveal potential abuses. Avoid campaigns by public officials by focusing more on “ordinary” people and issues rather than formal events.

Tip 19: Watch out for inflammatory speech and hate speech

Inflammatory and hate speech have been continuously present in Serbia’s political arena over the last decade, and intensifies during the pre-election period. Media, strictly adhering to public interest, should neither use inflammatory tones, hate speech, discrimination, nor sexism in reporting, but should also highlight and critically respond to such phenomena, especially when coming from public or political officials or candidates. Publish such statements only with critical distancing and expert commentary. Explain the context, target, purpose, whether the statement covers a deeper issue, identify it if it is political spin, and explain why it is socially and politically dangerous.

Tip 20: Pay attention to comments and bots

Party-affiliated bots are much more active in the pre-election period, so extra attention is needed for moderating comments and interactions on social media accounts or websites. Media should clearly explain moderation rules and systems publicly, and strictly apply them. Pre-moderation (publishing only comments that contribute constructively) is one option.

For articles prone to hate speech or bot activity, consider disabling comments. Avoid allowing bots to manipulate public opinion. While moderation may reduce site traffic or social engagement, bots are not your primary audience and may harm reputation and audience long-term. Media may be legally responsible for published user comments unless clearly disclaiming

responsibility and acting with due journalistic care. Removing unlawful content promptly may relieve liability.

Tip 21: Disable or adjust political Google ads on your portals

Google political ads might target your website even when paid political advertising is banned. You may choose to disable all political ads during the campaign or restrict ads via keywords or tags. If you allow such ads, adjust placements to specific contexts or content types. Some media ban all Google ads during campaigns.

Tip 22: Report and explain

During the pre-election period, reporting on election procedures, voter rights, and institutional responsibilities is crucial for informing citizens and protecting election integrity. Explain voting importance, procedures, how to check voter lists, register to vote abroad or at home (if sick or elderly), proper voting methods, voter rights, and the roles of institutions. Teach the public to recognize electoral irregularities and how to report them. Use infographics where possible. Use the principles of explanatory journalism to illuminate the roles of different levels of government and explain how election outcomes influence everyday life.

Tip 23: Handle polls and election predictions carefully

When presenting public opinion research and polls, media should provide full information: results, sample size and relevance, source, credibility, and previous research accuracy. Identify the poll's commissioner and if known, any political affiliation of the research firm. When conducting polls yourself, ensure methodology reliability and cautious result presentation. Street or phone polls should be clearly noted as not necessarily representative of the broader public.

Tip 24: Investigate

Use the period between election calling and campaign peak for investigative journalism. Plenty of resources exist to learn about candidates important to your audience, especially those with prior public office: how they performed and if they fulfilled campaign promises. Sources include the Anti-Corruption Agency portal, research centers, civil society organizations, and media. Well-presented investigative content attracts audiences. Always maintain high professional standards.

Tip 25: Watch out for paid political advertising content

Paid political advertising is allowed during the campaign but pay attention to the actual content. Advertisers must ensure their messages are truthful and accurate, while the media is obligated to uphold legal standards under the Law on Advertising, including safeguarding children and minors. Political ads must be clearly marked and separated from other content. Media may reject

ads violating ethical standards, but these must be clearly defined in internal media policies and acts. It is legitimate to refuse ads from parties or candidates spreading hate speech, racial, religious, or national hatred, disinformation, or conspiracy theories.

Tip 26: Follow party and candidate programs

Internet, official institution websites, and other media are excellent data sources. Use political party websites for information on platforms, goals, and declarations. Read programs and prepare questions for interviews. Political programs are a source of topics and possible questions. Verify how well parties know their programs, their grasp of issues, and their readiness to fulfill promises. Investigate specific promises and plans with detailed questions to show preparedness and present each candidate fairly.

Tip 27: Be thorough and highly professional in interviews

When interviewing candidates, research previous statements, promises, positions, achievements, and their biographies. Prepare thoroughly, demonstrate professionalism, impartiality, and readiness. Interviews directly shape voter opinions.

Ask short, direct, open questions about specific problems, views, plans, or promises. Focus on key topics and respect the agreed time. Insist on answers and return to topics if evaded. Ask questions important to citizens, linking to past examples (e.g., "Your party was in power, but..."). Use questions like "How do you plan to...", "Why didn't you...", "What exactly do you offer regarding...". Remind candidates and the audience about unfulfilled promises or abuses. Inquire about personal questions only if it is in the public interest. Never accept insults or humiliation during interviews; warn and if continued, end the interview. Refuse text authorization for print or online media. Provide authentic transcriptions and keep interview recordings.

Tip 28: Prepare debates well

If organizing pre-election debates, plan carefully with impartiality and professional moderation, as debates are key democratic tools for informing voters. Define goals and thematic frameworks, establish rules ensuring free expression. Invite all relevant electoral participants, applying clear, consistent criteria. Inform participants about themes, format, timing, speaking rights, and audience participation. At debate start, announce selection criteria and participation info.

Make debates engaging, addressing citizens' concerns. Use social media to announce, invite audience questions and select questions of your own for candidates. Apply rules strictly. Good debates inform citizens, foster political culture, test candidates' knowledge and skills, and build trust in media and elections. It is legally permissible to exclude candidates from debates who

engage in hate speech, incite religious or national hatred, or disseminate disinformation and conspiracy theories in their public statements.

Tip 29: Apply equal principles to all candidates

Respect the principle of equal treatment of all candidates and political subjects. If many candidates or lists run, clearly define criteria for how much coverage each gets. It is legitimate to ignore parties or candidates promoting hate speech or disinformation, but the decision must be transparent, documented internally, and well justified.

If interviewing one candidate, strive to interview their opponents, too, if possible. Inform the audience if opponents refuse interviews. The principle of equal treatment is a legal obligation for electronic media, but it is also recommended for print and online media, as it helps avoid accusations of political bias and contributes to maintaining your professional credibility. The principle of impartiality must not compromise your editorial independence. Maintain critical distance from political subjects and react to abuses, legal violations, hate speech, and inflammatory speech.

4.3 Election Silence Period

All registered media in Serbia are required to respect the election silence. Forty-eight hours before and on Election Day until the closing of polling stations, it is forbidden to publish election result projections, publicly present candidates and their electoral programs, or directly or indirectly call on voters to vote or not vote for certain lists or candidates. The election silence period does not prohibit reporting on the immediate course of the electoral process, such as voter turnout or the atmosphere at polling stations, as long as it is done in a way that does not violate the principles of election silence.

In countries like Serbia (and the others in the region), it is considered important, even under these circumstances, to oblige registered media to observe pre-election silence, so that citizens can make their decision with a "cooler head."

Tip 30: Use the days of election silence

Use the pre-election days, specifically the election silence period, to take a short break, and then get ready to take action. Prepare extensively for reporting on Election Day and the days following the elections. If possible, organize some kind of special election program, whether a live election program (for TV) or minute-by-minute reporting for portals. This is important not only for the public interest but also for the media's standing and visibility, given that citizens' interest in information during Election Day significantly increases.

Prepare your content and task distribution well. Preparation means planning work and resources, human and technical capacities, task allocation, selection of interlocutors, content, synopses, and program outlines for shows. Use these days also to check contacts and communication channels with political parties' election headquarters, and hear what they plan for Election Day and Night.

Tip 31: Check your program

Sometimes, electronic media, unwilling to violate election silence, broadcast insufficiently controlled (usually repeated) programs. To be sure you will not violate election silence at any moment, check the program lists and content in detail the day before it begins. This way you ensure that advertising video shorts or other pre-election content do not accidentally air during election silence.

Tip 32: Remove officials from program content

The same applies to content featuring officials who are also candidates in the elections, either as interlocutors or participants. They should not appear in your content during the election silence period in any form.

Some media are unsure what content can fill the gaps during the election silence in news coverage. Perhaps this is the right moment to turn news minutes into informative-educational content. Explain to citizens the voting procedure and ways to exercise their voting rights. Inform them why civic electoral participation is important, and emphasize the long historical struggle to secure the right of ordinary people to choose who will govern their state.

Tip 33: Again, watch out for Google ads and social media

We advise you to again pay attention to Google ads during election silence, as well as social media. Very often, online political ads are paid from the campaign's start until Election Day, meaning ads run even during the election silence, which is not allowed. Also, watch for party bots and their use of your interactive channels, primarily comments, to continue the election campaign during the election silence.

4.4 Election Day

Election Day is particularly complex for media professionals. Not only because it involves difficult, exhausting, full-day work, but also because it raises numerous professional dilemmas. What is allowed to be reported on before the polls close, and what is not? From whom can reliable information be obtained, and how can it be verified quickly? How can the program be filled during voting hours when the rules of electoral silence are in force? On Election Night, when results are announced, media must also be extremely cautious, as political participants may present

diametrically opposing information about the results. Another challenge is how to report on electoral irregularities, which have become a consistent feature of elections in Serbia. In this regard, it would be advisable for editorial offices with sufficient capacity to appoint an election editor who also acts as an advisor for resolving specific dilemmas.

Tip 34: Electoral silence is still in effect

Always keep in mind that on Election Day, until the polling stations close, electoral silence remains in force. Be careful not to violate it unintentionally. Live reporting presents a particular risk in this regard and as such, these segments must be well-prepared. To maintain credibility and respond to heightened public interest, media outlets should, within their capacity, organize special election programming even during the electoral silence.

Tip 35: What to do when candidates are voting?

To fill airtime, electronic and online media often report, visually and with audio, that a candidate has exercised their right to vote. While this is not illegal, we recommend publishing such content only after polling stations close, to avoid influencing voters or undermining the rules of electoral silence. Even neutral statements from candidates may impact voters. This also applies to political figures who are not direct candidates, such as public officials or party representatives. This airtime could instead be used to report on respected, nonpartisan public figures voting, which helps promote citizens' right to vote.

Tip 36: What to report on Election Day?

During electoral silence, media should focus on citizens, the voting process, democratic culture, and the technical aspects of the election, and not on results, politicians, or the campaign. Conduct interviews with voters, but ensure they do not violate the rules of silence. Likewise, report from polling stations and speak with election commission members, independent observers, and representatives of the civil sector in a neutral and responsible manner. Always verify your information before publishing. Rely on credible sources, especially independent observer missions, but also include official data from competent institutions. Pay attention to electoral irregularities, but proceed with caution, and only use verified information and trustworthy sources. Don't rush: being first isn't worth the risk of publishing false or incomplete information. You may report on voter turnout (based on official sources, including observer missions), but not in a way that suggests or predicts the outcome of the elections. For example, don't claim that higher turnout means that it favors a particular electoral list or candidate.

Tip 37: Do not publish statements from electoral parties, candidates, or nominees

Unless the content is of clear public interest, avoid publishing statements or press releases from electoral participants before the end of electoral silence. When reporting on electoral irregularities, rely on credible sources, primarily independent observer missions. You may also refer to citizens who are monitoring the election process (if they have reported irregularities), but only with supporting evidence and after verifying the claims. If you have video or photographic evidence, check its authenticity before broadcasting. Even when reporting on irregularities, avoid naming political entities during the electoral silence.

Tip 38: Be cautious with results

Once official and unofficial election results begin to come in and the electoral silence ends, the media has an added responsibility. They must inform the public in a timely, accurate, and impartial manner, without creating confusion or societal tension. This does not mean ignoring electoral irregularities, whether they occurred before, during, or after the election, but as mentioned earlier, this must be done responsibly and professionally.

It is important to emphasize, repeatedly if needed, that all results coming from political parties or organizations that are not officially administering the elections are unofficial, or unofficial and incomplete. Take special note of the common practice where, on Election Night, representatives of electoral lists or candidates present favorable data, such as from polling stations where they performed well. This should be clearly communicated to the audience to prevent misinformation. Avoid sensationalism, and involve experts wherever possible. When announcing results, always indicate what percentage of polling stations has been processed and cite the source. Always keep in mind that the only official results are those released by the competent authority.

Tip 39: Respect the presumption of innocence, but pursue the story

When reporting on electoral irregularities, it is crucial, as previously stated, to thoroughly verify the information. Seek confirmation or opinions from independent observer missions or official institutions, if possible. Respect the presumption of innocence, and do not allow your media outlet to become a platform for conflicts between political or electoral participants.

At the same time, document all cases of electoral irregularities that you have discovered and published after verification. Insist that they not be forgotten and that they are followed up on. Keep your audience regularly informed about the progress of specific cases that are significant or indicative.

Tip 40: Elections do not end on Election Day

It is important to understand that elections do not end on Election Day. This is not only due to the fact that final election results in Serbia can sometimes take days to be announced, or that elections may be repeated at certain polling stations. It is also necessary to monitor events related to challenges to the announced results or claims of serious irregularities that compromise the integrity of the process, i.e., electoral fraud. During this period, it is vital for media to report professionally, to carefully verify both the credibility of information and the credibility of the sources providing it. Avoid emotionally charged reporting that may increase social tension or even lead to violence. Be fair, demand justice, work in the interest of the law and the citizens, and always be a voice of reason. Criticize violent methods, no matter which side they originate from.

Inform the public about how to seek electoral justice. Follow the process, report on the work of the courts and the realization of the right to an effective legal remedy and protection for those affected. Keep citizens informed about how they can exercise their rights.

4.5 Engaging Content for the Audience

Although, as previously mentioned, public interest in the media increases during the electoral process, this does not mean we should avoid using creative strategies, technical tools, and other methods to provide citizens with content that is both engaging and of high quality. Sometimes, election reporting, given the guidelines and legal restrictions, can feel like the film “Groundhog Day.” There are ways to make media content engaging, attractive, and educational, without falling into sensationalism. While drawing in an audience with engaging content during the election period is perfectly acceptable, the ultimate and most important goal should be to raise the political literacy of citizens and their awareness of the importance of elections and participation. Remember that engaging content does not require sensationalism, and credibility does not have to be boring.

Tip 41: Report thematically

Your election reporting should not be limited to relaying information, press releases, promises, and statements from political participants. Always dig deeper, investigate what lies behind these superficial forms. Ask the participants to address important issues and topics that concern citizens, and consult relevant experts. Don’t allow political figures to speak in empty phrases - demand specific content, ideas, programs, and plans.

Tip 42: Explain

Explain issues to your audience and educate them, but do so using a creative approach. Why are elections important? What does the institutional system look like, and how does the state function? Explain that elected officials are merely public servants delegated to perform duties on behalf of the citizens. Clarify potential abuses of power, how they manifest in practice, and how they can be prevented. Also explain what electoral irregularities look like, how they are carried out, and how to respond to them. Try to highlight voter apathy through the lens of the everyday citizen.

Tip 43: Humanize problems and phenomena

Give every topic and report a human face whenever possible. Add emotion to your story, not to manipulate, but to enhance its clarity and emphasize the importance of the topic. Use narrators/interviewees to draw attention to the issue, bring the story closer to the audience, and help citizens identify with the topic you're focusing on. Tell the story through real-life issues and vivid imagery.

Tip 44: Ask citizens and experts, not politicians

During election coverage, your primary focus should be on citizens and experts. Let their perspectives dominate the narrative. Make complex issues relatable, show how they affect ordinary people and their everyday experiences. Through conversations with citizens, you'll often discover important topics you hadn't even considered. The same goes for experts in various fields.

Tip 45: Focus on solutions and follow your story

In every opportunity, look for solutions to the issue at hand. Ask how a problem has been resolved in other cities, regions, or communities, and present the best, most applicable options. Most problems have more than one solution. Push for clear answers: why is one solution chosen over another? With persistence, your story could even spark political change. Continue tracking its development.

Tip 46: Be persistent with your questions

Another creative approach is to repeatedly ask the same question on the issue you are investigating to various officials every time you encounter them. Create a story about how many times you insisted on the same question and how many times you received no answer.

Tip 47: Don't blindly follow protocols, but don't ignore them either

We've already mentioned the need for a creative approach to press releases and information from public authorities, especially during the pre-election period. Publishing them without journalistic intervention, or uncritically covering official events involving public office holders, is not in the public interest, does not improve citizens' lives, and is often unappealing and dull.

However, protocol-based press releases and events should not be completely ignored. They can serve as a starting point for further research. These events may offer opportunities to ask questions that matter to citizens, dig beneath the surface, and uncover details like how much an investment costs, who will benefit from it, what problem it solved, and why something took so long. This means attending such events well-prepared and with precise questions in mind. If a journalist manages to ask a clear, relevant question at a protocol event, one that does not fit into the pre-set narrative, that's already a significant professional achievement in the public interest.

Tip 48: Address disinformation and political propaganda

As mentioned earlier, the duty of the media is not only to report in accordance with professional standards, meaning objectively, credibly, and comprehensively, but also to expose disinformation, spin, malicious content, and political propaganda strategies. Election reporting can become a valuable opportunity to enhance political and media literacy, and content that reveals manipulation techniques can be especially appealing to your audience. Focus on concrete examples. Use humor to debunk disinformation and spin, but do so moderately and without cynicism.

Tip 49: Use social media and strong visual tools

Use social media to attract and engage your audience, especially younger demographics. Incorporate multimedia: photos, emojis, reels, animations, and infographics, and prepare visuals in advance to simplify and speed up post creation. Turn dry statistical data into comparisons and ratios. Always use subtitles in video statements and leverage every visual aid available to make your reports as attractive and compelling as possible. Being creative means being free, so explore and experiment. This is allowed, as long as your work adheres to professional standards, legal frameworks, regulatory bodies, and editorial policies. Develop your best practices, and monitor your performance and audience trends.

Tip 50: Maximize interactive content

If possible, introduce as much interactive content as you can on your website and social media platforms during the election period (and ideally beyond). Interactive formats increase readership, keep users engaged, encourage content sharing, and can be highly educational and

socially beneficial. This includes audience-engagement content such as: knowledge quizzes (on elections, politics, or other relevant topics), polls/voting tools, interactive infographics, interactive maps, calculators and digital tools, “You ask” formats (where users submit questions to political figures or experts, and the editorial team facilitates the exchange).

Glossary of Terms

Anti-Corruption Agency: A state body that supervises the use of public resources in campaigns and sanctions official campaigns and illegal financing of political activities.

Bots: Organized users of social networks (often affiliated with political parties) who manipulate comments and other content to create a false impression of public attitudes toward certain topics and phenomena.

Social networks: Internet or mobile platforms that enable two-way communication through user-generated content, i.e., media available on specific platforms designed to allow users to create content and interact with information and its sources.

Disinformation: The dissemination or transmission of false facts, especially when intended to cause serious social harm.

Explanatory journalism/reporting: A journalistic approach that involves explaining complex processes (e.g., electoral procedures) in a clear and accessible manner.

Fact-checking: The process of verifying the accuracy of facts, statements, and claims made publicly to combat disinformation and ensure reliable citizen information.

Official Campaign: The use of public events, gatherings, or meetings organized by government bodies for media promotion of candidates who are simultaneously public officials, which in Serbia is prohibited 30 days before Election Day, as it undermines the principle of equality among election participants.

Google Ads: Automated advertisements appearing on websites. They can pose a challenge to respecting election silence and laws on political advertising.

Hate Speech: Any form of communication that spreads, justifies, or incites hatred, violence, or discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion or belief, disability, developmental difficulties, age, sexual orientation, gender identity and characteristics, social origin, or other protected characteristics.

Interactive content: Media tools that enable direct audience engagement (e.g., quizzes, polls, calculators). They increase citizen engagement and literacy.

Internal rules: Internal media documents defining the conduct of journalists, editors, and editorial staff during the election campaign, including rules on advertising, reporting, social media conduct, and relations with political participants.

Election Campaign: The period from the announcement of elections until election silence, during which a political entity legally introduces voters and the public to its program and candidates for the upcoming elections.

Electoral Irregularity: Any action during elections that violates legal rules and the principles of free and fair elections (e.g., voter intimidation, vote buying, manipulation of voter lists).

Electoral Legal Protection: Mechanisms through which complaints can be lodged and irregularities reported, with the expectation of a timely and effective institutional response.

Election Silence: The period starting 48 hours before Election Day and lasting until the closing of polling stations, during which political advertising, candidate presentations, and publishing election projections are prohibited.

Election calendar: A document containing all key deadlines in the election process (date of election announcement, campaign end, Election Day, etc.), important for planning editorial work.

Public interest: The public's right to access information on issues and events of general social importance, based on which, citizens make decisions and public opinion is formed. This may include information related to protecting public health and safety, exposing criminal activity, preventing deception, or uncovering incompetence and corruption in public institutions.

Public Service Media: Public broadcasters (RTS and RTV) providing informative, educational, entertaining, or other content in accordance with the Law on Public Service Broadcasters, public interest, and high professional standards.

Media Deserts: Geographic areas or communities where residents lack access to relevant, local, and professionally produced information due to the absence or lack of quality media (also involves using media as a political tool).

Campaign Monitoring Board: A parliamentary body overseeing the behavior of political participants and public services during the campaign.

Independent Observers: Organizations or individuals monitoring the election process to protect its integrity. They are key sources of information about irregularities.

Online Media: All types of media publishing on the internet using various platforms to continuously collect, process, and publish information in accordance with journalistic principles on various spheres of life and at various levels, from local, national to global.

Diversity of opinions: Presentation of diverse political and social views in media without favoritism, forming the basis for democratic debate.

Political Advertising: The broadcasting and publishing of advertisements, public appeals, video clips/commercials, or any other form of public advertising by a political entity.

Political Subject or Election Candidate: Denotes a political party, independent candidate, coalition, or list of independent candidates participating in elections in Serbia according to the law.

Voter Rights: Citizen rights established by law in the election process: the right to vote, access to voter lists, application for voting at home or abroad, complaints.

Pre-election debates: Structured media events in which candidates present positions on pre-defined topics under pre-established rules.

Pre-election program: All media content related to presenting candidates and electoral lists. Must be clearly separated from other programming or media content.

Pre-moderation/Post-moderation: Techniques of managing user comments: pre-moderation allows only approved comments, while post-moderation involves deleting inappropriate comments after publication.

Professional reporting: Journalistic work based on ethical and legal standards, including fact-checking, impartiality, balance, respect of differences, and distancing from political interests.

Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM): A state authority responsible for supervising the implementation of the Law on Electronic Media, including monitoring election reporting. There are many complaints about its work due to political bias.

Hidden Advertising: Political content presented as independent journalism without clear labeling that it is paid for. Prohibited by law and ethical codes.

Spin: Manipulation of information to shape public opinion in favor of a particular political narrative.

Print Media: Newspapers and other periodic publications issued daily, weekly, monthly, or at intervals of up to six months, which through organized and continuous activity collect, process, and publish information according to journalistic principles on various spheres of life and levels, from local, national to global.

Thematic reporting: Focusing reports on problems and topics of public importance rather than daily political spins.

Editorial Independence: The right and obligation of journalists and media to conduct their work free from political, economic, or institutional pressure.

Visual ethics: Principles regulating the use of images, graphics, and visual identity in reporting so as not to promote tensions, stereotypes, or discrimination.

Inflammatory speech: Statements that incite tension, polarization, and aggression in the public sphere. Particularly dangerous in the pre-election period.

References

- [Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media](#)
- [Press Council](#)
- [Anti-Corruption Agency](#)
- [Business Registers Agency](#)
- [Republic Electoral Commission](#)
- [Supervisory Board for Election Campaign Monitoring](#)
- [CRTA \(Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability\)](#)
- [Transparency Serbia](#)
- [Bureau of Social Research BIRODI](#)
- [Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia](#)
- [Journalists' Association of Serbia](#)
- [Association of Independent Local Media "Local Press"](#)
- [Law on Public Information and Media](#)
- [Law on Electronic Media](#)
- [Law on Public Service Broadcasters](#)
- [Law on the Election of Members of Parliament](#)
- [Law on the Election of the President of the Republic](#)
- [Law on Local Election](#)
- [Law on Prevention of Corruption](#)
- [Law on Financing Political Activities](#)
- [Law on National Councils of National Minorities](#)
- [Law on Local Self-Government](#)
- [Rulebook on the Manner of Fulfillment of Media Service Providers' Obligations During Election Campaigns](#)
- [Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics](#)
- [Final report of the ODIHR Election Observation Mission, June 2024](#)
- [Other reports of the ODIHR Election Observation Mission](#)
- [Election Observation Handbook](#)
- [CRTA Recommendations for Fair and Free Elections](#)
- [Pre-election Misuse of Public Resources](#)
- [Analysis of Electoral Process Integrity](#)
- [Monitoring Media Diversity in the European Union: Report on Serbia](#)
- [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights: Human Rights and Elections Guide for Journalists](#)
- [International Federation of Journalists\) Advice for Media Reporting on Elections](#)

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