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ARTICLE 19

EUROPE

Protecting journalists in Serbia

Learnings from Stalna radna grupa za bezbednost novinara
(Standing Working Group for the Safety of Journalists)

Media Freedom Rapid Response

2023

First published by ARTICLE 19 Europe, October 2023
www.article19.org

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This Directory is part of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) project, which tracks, monitors, and responds to violations of press and media freedom in EU member States and candidate countries. This project provides legal and practical support, public advocacy, and information to protect journalists and media workers. The MFRR is organised by a consortium led by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, including ARTICLE 19 Europe, the European Federation of Journalists, Free Press Unlimited, the Institute for Applied Informatics at the University of Leipzig, International Press Institute, and CCI/Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT). The project is co-funded by the European Commission. For more information, see www.mfr.eu.



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1. Introduction

In 2022, as part of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) project, ARTICLE 19 Europe published the *Directory of initiatives on the safety of journalists in Europe*, followed by an [updated second edition](#) in October 2023. For the first time, the Directory brings together information about initiatives on the safety of journalists deployed by the state, or in which the state is involved, in the countries covered by the MFRR – for the benefit of journalists, civil society, and policymakers across Europe.

Initiatives like these are crucial to enhancing journalists' safety and fighting widespread impunity for crimes against them – yet it is not always clear how they were created, how they operate, or how to set one up. We therefore decided to dive into two of the initiatives listed in our Directory more deeply:

- **Stalna radna grupa za bezbednost novinara (Standing Working Group for the Safety of Journalists) in Serbia** – hereafter 'the Working Group' – which is the focus of this report; and
- **PersVeilig (Press Safety) in The Netherlands**, which is the focus of a [separate report](#).

The objectives of these reports are threefold:

1. To shed light on how initiatives to enhance the safety of journalists in two very different country contexts were established;
2. To explore how these initiatives operate, including the successes they have achieved and the challenges they face; and
3. To identify lessons that states, advocates, and the media community across Europe can use to create their own in-country initiatives.

Based on interviews with key stakeholders and additional desk research, this report begins with an overview of the **country context** for journalists' safety in Serbia.

We then move on to explore how the **Working Group** was created, who is involved, what it does, and the successes and challenges it faces.

Finally, we offer **lessons learned** from the Working Group's experience for the media community, advocates, and state actors across Europe to consider when setting up safety initiatives in their own countries. Most of these lessons were directly proposed by the people we interviewed for this report:

- Veran Matić (President, Association of Independent Electronic Media)
- Tamara Filipović Stevanović (Project Manager, Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS))
- Branko Stamenković (Public Prosecutor, Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office)
- Media freedom professional involved in the Working Group¹

ARTICLE 19, MFRR, and the authors of this report are deeply grateful for their contribution.

¹ This person chose to remain anonymous.

2. Country context: Serbia

The safety landscape for journalists in Serbia is increasingly complex and fraught, characterised by numerous institutional, political, economic, and societal tensions. In ARTICLE 19's [Global Expression Report 2023](#) (an annual look at the right to free expression and information across the world), Serbia is ranked 83rd out of 161 countries, with an Expression Score of 53 out of 100. The country's [media landscape](#) – including its [regulatory authorities and public broadcasters](#) – lacks independence, and it comes in at 91st place in Reporters Without Borders' [World Index](#). Serbia is a member of the [Media Freedom Coalition](#): a partnership of countries that have committed to working together to promote media freedom at home and abroad.

'pro-government and independent media are regularly positioned against one another, with dire consequences for media concentration and independence'

Politically, ethnically, culturally, and historically, Serbia has faced intense upheaval for much of its history – including prolonged violent conflict in the 1990s. The media is subject to the same divisions that plague society; pro-government and independent media are regularly positioned against one another, with dire consequences for [media concentration and independence](#). The decreasing number of independent media outlets face increasing instability and scarcity of resources, which curtails their reach and [viability](#) – especially when combined with the decline in public trust of the media and [increase in hostility](#) against them (often encouraged by pro-government media and government leaders). This results in declining space for a diversity of opinions, critical engagement, and debate.

During the 2022 elections, the media channels of Serbia's ruling party received [more media coverage](#) than the other political parties. This undermines democratic processes and enshrines the ruling party's narrative (and is further exacerbated by [engagement-focused news-distribution algorithms](#)). This trend may also partially explain the rise of [anti-Western sentiment in the country](#), as well as the aforementioned decline in [trust in the media](#).

In Serbia's [polarised political system](#), journalists face a range of difficulties when undertaking their work, including (but not limited to):

- Physical violence, negative opinions, and low levels of trust from the general public;
- Pressure, denigrating comments, and [regular legal harassment \(SLAPPs\)](#) from public officials;
- [Coordinated online harassment and abuse](#) from public officials and the general public; and
- Poor working conditions and a lack of economic stability, especially at the local level.

The [Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists](#) (managed by the Council of Europe in cooperation with partner organisations, including ARTICLE 19), which reports on serious threats to the safety of journalists and media freedom in Europe, published [14 alerts](#) for Serbia in 2022; at the time of writing (October 2023), there are [9 active alerts](#). The MFRR monitoring platform recorded [41 alerts](#) in 2022 and 36 so far (as of October) in 2023. The Independent Journalists Association of Serbia (NUNS) [recorded](#) 137 cases of physical and verbal assaults, property damages, and threats in 2022 and 146 cases (including 8 physical assaults) from January–October 2023.²

² The discrepancy between the statistics in this paragraph is due to differences in the methodologies used by the organisations recording threats and attacks against journalists.

Impunity for crimes against journalists is also a significant problem in Serbia, and many murder cases – including those of Slavko Ćuruvija, Milan Pantić, and Dada Vujasinović – [remain unresolved](#). In April 2023, for example, MFRR members [visited](#) Belgrade ahead of the final verdict in the case of editor and publisher Slavko Ćuruvij to mark the 24th anniversary of his murder and renew their calls for justice. Together with local journalists, they urged officials to consider the verdict ‘[a litmus test for the rule of law and democracy more widely](#)’. Six months later, the Appeals Court has yet to announce their verdict, and many [suspect](#) it will not result in a conviction.

‘Impunity for crimes against journalists is a significant problem in Serbia, and many murder cases remain unresolved’

Serbia’s media community and state authorities have attempted to establish a number of safety mechanisms to address these challenges and enhance the safety of journalists:

- [The Commission for the Investigation of Murders of Journalists](#) (established by the government and run as a multi-stakeholder initiative), which investigates open cases and works to uncover new evidence;
- [The Working Group for the Security and Protection of Journalists](#) (established by the government in 2020 to [foster](#) inter- and cross-sectoral dialogue), which has been inactive since 2021, when the majority of journalists’ associations [left the group](#) due to a widespread smear campaign – led by newspapers and TV channels close to the ruling party – against the investigative portal KRIK;
- **A system to monitor violence and encourage state authorities to respond more urgently**, which the Ombudsperson (together with the media community) attempted to establish but which remained inactive for two years due to an internal disagreement regarding reporting methodology; and

- **Stalna radna grupa za bezbednost novinara (Standing Working Group for the Safety of Journalists)**, which brings state authorities and the media community together to improve the legal protection and safety of journalists – and, at the time of writing, is Serbia’s only fully functional safety mechanism.

It is for these reasons that the latter Working Group was chosen as the subject of this report.

3. Stalna radna grupa za bezbednost novinara (Standing Working Group for the Safety of Journalists)

Foundations and members

Stalna radna grupa za bezbednost novinara (Standing Working Group for the Safety of Journalists) is the result of intensive dialogue between state authorities and the media community that began during the process of Serbia's accession to the EU (in line with the Government of Serbia's [Action Plan for Chapter 23](#)), signalling that the EU accession process is an important driver of institutional change.

In 2016, the Public Prosecutor and the Ministry of Interior signed an initial Agreement to increase the safety of journalists. In 2017, this Agreement was expanded to include the media community, resulting in the establishment of the Working Group. The founding members were:

- Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM);
- Association of Media;
- Association of Online Media;
- Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS);
- Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina;
- Journalists' Association of Serbia;
- Journalists Association of Vojvodina (which left the group at an early stage);
- Ministry of Interior;
- OSCE Mission to Serbia (observer status), which largely engages by coordinating and proposing group activities; and
- Republican Public Prosecution Office.

Participation in the Working Group is voluntary. The OSCE mission to Serbia supports most of the group's activities, and the group's members cover the rest. The Working Group does not have any staff or volunteers.

Roles and responsibilities

In 2016, the original [Agreement on cooperation and measures to increase the safety of journalists](#) committed the Public Prosecutor and Ministry of Interior to the following responsibilities:

- The Ministry of Interior and the Public Prosecutor are responsible for keeping **separate records** of crimes against journalists at all levels (central, regional, and local).
- Dedicated Public Prosecutors are tasked with producing **quarterly reports** based on the status of criminal law cases relating to the safety of journalists (which are discussed at the Working Group's quarterly meetings). This allows for oversight of case workflow and status – which, the Prosecutor from the Supreme Public Prosecutor Office told us, is important due to stringent regulations of prosecutors' conduct.
- The Supreme Public Prosecutor Office and Ministry of Interior were tasked with ensuring **urgent and efficient investigation** of crimes against journalists. In 2020, this served as a basis for a [Binding Prosecutorial Instruction](#) that legally requires Public Prosecutors to initiate investigations within 24 hours of receiving a complaint, and to take an official statement from the journalist within 48 hours.

In 2017, an expanded Agreement (which retained the above commitments) also set out a legal basis for the establishment and mandate of a broader Working Group, which was envisaged as a platform for journalists' associations and state authorities to exchange information about active cases of violence against journalists. The Working Group's mandate is explored in the following section.

How the Working Group protects journalists in Serbia

The group's work consists of three key strands, which are set out in the Agreement and operationalised through action plans:

- System of contact points, including a 24/7 hotline;
- Improving the legislative and institutional framework; and
- Training and awareness-raising.

These are explored in further detail below.

System of contact points

The Working Group has established a system of [115 contact points](#) to ensure state authorities meaningfully engage in cases of violence against journalists. The contact points are present in every Public Prosecutors Office and operate in every police unit in the country. They are in charge of overseeing criminal cases of violence against journalists and are responsible for coordinating criminal investigations and liaising with journalists' associations and media lawyers, to whom they are continually available via a [24/7 hotline](#).

*'On average, the hotline receives
20–40 calls per month'*

The hotline is operated by lawyers and legal experts, all of whom are also contact points within the media organisations that are Working Group members. The hotline's purposes are threefold:

- to provide free legal aid to journalists under threat;
- to assess each case and establish whether it meets the threshold of criminality; and
- to alert contact points in the police and Office of the Public Prosecutor if a case is serious and requires their urgent action.

On average, the hotline receives 20–40 calls per month, of which it redirects 5–10 to police and prosecutor contact points. The Working Group regularly shares reports about the data obtained through the hotline with high-level officials, including the Cabinet of the Prime Minister.

The Public Prosecutors and a representative of ANEM explained that, currently, resources to support the system of contact points are more utilised and more functional in Serbia's capital and other large cities. For this reason, the Working Group's [2023–25 Action Plan](#) states that it is working to ensure the system is uniform, streamlined, and decentralised throughout the country. To that end, interviewees told us, the Working Group has organised several meetings between contact points and local communities.

In 2022, for example, members of the Working Group met with local journalists and contact points in [the case of OK Radio](#), a leading independent radio station in Vranje (a small town in the south of Serbia) that suffered a wave of attacks and threats at the hands of local businessman Dejan Nikolic Kantar. These attacks started in March 2022, when a company connected to Kantar planned to illegally build new gambling premises next to OK Radio's premises and the station's staff filed a complaint. After his attempt to purchase the premises failed, and following a series of violent incidents and threats, Kantar walled up the premises of the media outlet. He was arrested in June 2022.

'The Working Group met with local contact points, which resulted in the prosecution expediting the case and raising the charges'

After Kantar's arrest, the Working Group met with local contact points (OK Radio, the local Public Prosecutor, and the police), which resulted in the prosecution expediting the case and raising the charges against Kantar. Working Group members also attended all the court hearings and expressed continuous solidarity and support with the OK Radio journalists.

In October 2022, the court found Kantar [guilty](#) of violent behaviour towards the OK Radio journalists and sentenced him to 14 months' imprisonment. Following this verdict, in August 2023, the court reached one more verdict for [threatening](#) OK Radio staff and sentenced him to 18 months' imprisonment.

According to Veran Matić (President of the Association of Independent Electronic Media) – a [fake arrest warrant](#) for whom appeared on posters in Vranje during the Working Group's visit, illustrating the intimidating environment in which it operates – the court's verdicts were an important victory for both the media community and the Working Group. Matić told us the result demonstrates that the system of contact points can be effective in ensuring state authorities investigate in line with the law and in improving coordination efforts by all parties.

'the system of contact points can be effective in ensuring state authorities investigate in line with the law and in improving coordination efforts by all parties'

However, this case also illustrates the complexities of the Serbian context. Even in the courthouse, Kantar [explicitly threatened](#) the radio station's owners. A planning inspector ordered the illegal gambling premises next to OK Radio to be demolished, but local companies refused to do so for fear of reprisals; two OK Radio employees left their jobs due to fears for their safety; and, while four men were tried for threatening Working Group member Veran Matić, they were [found not guilty](#).

Improving the legislative and institutional framework

In 2022, the Working Group [published](#) a legal analysis of amendments to Serbia's Criminal Code, which identified particular criminal offences that can be committed against journalists. As journalists have a privileged legal status in Serbia's criminal law (similar to public officials), criminal offences committed against journalists during or related to their

work could lead to higher sanctions. The Supreme Public Prosecution Office later adopted the analysis in its entirety, meaning that it would have served as a basis for future legislative amendments. However, the amendments have stalled due to [concerns](#) that they could hinder media freedom and freedom of expression.

'journalists have a privileged legal status in Serbia's criminal law (similar to public officials)'

The Working Group has also [analysed](#) the transparency and communications practices of state institutions in charge of the protection of journalists, and has found insufficient level of openness. Following this study, the Working Group proposed recommendations that were partly incorporated in the Working Group's action plans.

Training and awareness-raising

The Working Group has organised a number of campaigns and training sessions for journalists, the general public, police, and Public Prosecutors' staff. The Group also organises events to [strengthen ties](#) among its own members – including a study visit to PersVeilig (Press Safety), an initiative in the Netherlands that is the subject of [our other report](#) in this series.

Successes and challenges

Below, we highlight key successes that the Working Group has achieved and how it has achieved them, as well as challenges that it continues to face.

Successes

Many of our interviewees informed us that the contact points system is having a positive impact and enjoys the trust of Serbia's media community. The Public Prosecutor also told

us that their engagement in the Working Group has ensured they remain focused on the obstacles journalists face and ensure a higher level of cooperation with them. This is corroborated by the Public Prosecutors' records, which show a steady increase in [cases of crimes against journalists](#) being investigated and prosecuted. Especially relevant are data and records documented by the Public Prosecutors' Offices that are regularly shared with members of the Working Group and contrasted with the monitoring reports of the Journalists' Association. Also, based on these reports, the Higher Prosecutors can monitor and control the progress of ongoing investigations and prosecutions. However, according to Tamara Filipović Stevanović (Project Manager, NUNS), a number of relevant cases are still unresolved, causing frustration and doubt within the media community.

'Despite initial friction and miscommunication, the Working Group has overcome many institutional obstacles and political pressure to protect journalists'

Despite initial friction and miscommunication, the Working Group has overcome many institutional obstacles and political pressure to protect journalists, and relationships between its members have improved over the years – especially following the [case](#) of journalist Milan Jovanović. Former Grocka mayor, Dragoljub Simonovic, ordered an arson attack on Jovanović's house in December 2018. This was a [turning point](#) for the Working Group and its internal dynamics: in the aftermath of the attack, the Working Group organised an urgent meeting, and – for the first time – the police officers in charge of the investigation shared information with the media community about their investigation plan and procedures. More importantly, Working Group members continually expressed support and solidarity with Jovanović.

Since then, group members' relationships and levels of engagement have evolved, and, according to many interviewees, are now characterised by collaboration and mutual respect. Importantly, as Tamara Filipović Stevanović informed us, their relationships are

no longer 'person-dependent' but rather are structured and institutionalised – which is of crucial importance, given regular staffing changes in the Ministry of Interior.

'The Working Group has been able to effectively engage state authorities in dozens of cases of threats and violence against journalists'

The Working Group's members ensure that each case receives careful consideration, including by the Public Prosecutors and the police. [The case of journalist Dragojlo Blagojevic](#) shows how the media community's persistence convinced the Public Prosecutor to address crucial police omissions. Blagojevic filed charges for telephone threats he received in 2022. A few months later, the Public Prosecutor dismissed the case because the police said the threats did not take place. After a member of the Working Group provided evidence that the phone call *did* take place, the Public Prosecutor reopened the investigation and requested data directly from the telephone operator, sidestepping the police. This data proved that the police had made a serious omission in their investigation – and that there had actually been more than one telephone threat. [The case was re-initiated](#), but it is currently delayed due to the complicated process of retrieving international telephone data.

In addition to these examples, interviewees informed us that the Working Group has also been able to effectively engage state authorities in dozens of other cases of threats and violence against journalists.

Challenges

The Working Group's members share the same objectives – to end impunity for crimes against journalists and ensure a safe and enabling media environment – but their approaches vary, which sometimes results in professional clashes. According to Tamara Filipović Stevanović and the Public Prosecutor, these clashes require patience and understanding to resolve.

In particular, challenges can arise due to the Working Group's members including both state authorities and media organisations. Many media actors are frustrated that a number of cases [remain unresolved](#) and believe the state should invest more in effectively investigating violations, while the Public Prosecutor believes the media community should be more conscious of the complexities of criminal proceedings and the need for due diligence. These group dynamics are intensified by Serbia's extreme political polarisation and [accusations](#) of political influence over the work of the judiciary. These factors, interviewees told us, can often be a serious obstacle to collaboration.

'more efforts must be invested to define a strategic approach to each case and its potential resolution – one that is not based on expectations, pressure, or blame'

To ensure relationships between members continue to improve in the future, more efforts must be invested to define a strategic approach to each case and its potential resolution – one that is not based on expectations, pressure, or blame, which are less effective than directly engaging and practising solidarity with other group members, as Veran Matic (President, ANEM) told us. To improve group dynamics and coordination, efforts should also be taken to enhance members' understandings of each other's challenges, work processes, and collective expectations.

According to Tamara Filipović Stevanović, several other internal challenges also need to be considered, including the Working Group's sole focus on criminal law – which, together with the lack of involvement of other state authorities (especially the court system and the executive), can hamper the Working Group's results. There seems to be a clear need to increase the visibility of the Working Group in the media and among the public, especially at a local level. In addition, the Working Group's engagement is rather reactive: it seeks to reduce harm once an incident has occurred, which does not provide much space for prevention.

Finally, Veran Matic suggested that the Working Group may have outgrown its initial engagement framework. Remediating this would require the establishment of a more structured body, with a dedicated coordinator and budget, that takes a structural approach to the issues that the Working Group currently addresses in an ad-hoc manner alongside a multitude of ongoing cases.

Serbia's toxic environment is fertile ground for a range of safety threats against journalists – including those perpetrated by political elites, which are more difficult to identify as criminal but still have a chilling effect on media freedom, as Tamara Filipović Stevanović explained. In some cases, court jurisprudence and drawn-out processes can hamper the group's work; one media freedom professional involved in the Working Group therefore recommended improving the uniformity of judicial conduct and sentencing.

'The chief external challenge is widespread political polarisation, which immediately and significantly politicises cases'

However, the chief external challenge is widespread political polarisation, which not only immediately and significantly politicises cases but can also affect relationships between Working Group members. Veran Matic explained that the Working Group should take an innovative approach to cases caused by or relating to political polarisation, including reaching a broader audience and engaging with local communities to ensure they do not fall through the political and administrative cracks.

4. Key lessons learned

This final section offers lessons from the Working Group, with a view to assisting the media community, advocates, and state actors across Europe who may wish to establish safety initiatives in their own countries. They provide practical and experiential lessons for allocating responsibility and improving internal communication during the initial stages of establishing a safety mechanism.

Given the Serbian context, these lessons should be especially useful in countries where a fraught sociopolitical environment and/or a complex media landscape could hamper the development and functioning of safety mechanisms.

Most of these lessons were suggested by our expert interviewees, to whom we are deeply grateful.

- 1. Multi-stakeholder process:** The creation, implementation, and development of a protection mechanism should include all relevant stakeholders – including media and journalists’ representatives, media freedom civil society organisations, and academia – and ensure participatory processes. This will ensure all parties agree with the goals and functions, and will ensure ownership by all key actors.
- 2. Clear roles and responsibilities:** There must be explicit and shared agreement on the mandate of: (a) the mechanism, and (b) each of its members. Roles and responsibilities should be spelled out clearly and unambiguously, and work plans, to be implemented by the various actors, should be developed.
- 3. Open communication and transparency:** Group members should foster an open and transparent communication protocol, regularly discussing expectations and identifying risks – especially risks regarding potential political influence – and ways to overcome them. Building an identity as a neutral entity with a mediating role can help to address some of these challenges. In the same vein, members of the

mechanism should look for opportunities to engage with their beneficiaries or the general public outside of regular activities and meetings. There needs to be transparency among members, as well as between members and the public.

4. **Mutual trust:** The functionality of safety initiatives often requires the involvement of various state and non-state actors that may lack mutual trust, which is the most salient requirement for any successful safety mechanism. This is especially the case in a polarised climate. To build group cohesion, trust, and respect, participation and group activities for members should be a top priority – not only meetings but also study visits, learning opportunities, and other shared experiences – as well as collaborative work on tasks like communications plans, confidentiality and privacy rules, and coordination.
5. **Inclusive, accessible, barrier-free support:** The support and services that the initiative provides should be hands-on, easy to access, unencumbered by unnecessary administrative burdens, and equally accessible to all journalists – regardless of gender, sexual identity, race, age, disability, etc.

‘any safety initiative must consistently and meaningfully engage with women journalists in all their diversity’

6. **An intersectional feminist approach:** From its inception and throughout all of its activities, any safety initiative must consistently and meaningfully engage with women journalists in all their diversity (taking into account intersecting forms of discrimination such as sexual orientation, age, race, religion, class, etc.). An intersectional gender approach enables the initiative’s members, and consequently the broader media community and state authorities, to deepen their understanding of the interplay between sociopolitical factors and the specific risks that women

journalists are exposed to. This is an important first step towards creating a [feminist approach to the safety of journalists](#).

- 7. Consistent information-sharing:** When it comes to the management of criminal cases, a structured and consistent information-sharing methodology is vital: not only for journalists and their families, but also to enable state authorities to react promptly when an investigation falls behind.
- 8. Local relevance:** Any safety initiative must be designed with local contexts and culture in mind so that it can effectively and appropriately address local journalists' needs and respond to the specific threats and harms they face.
- 9. Maintain boundaries:** Members should not only be clear on their own role but also recognise – and maintain personal and professional boundaries regarding – the responsibilities of other actors, particularly state authorities. The media's role is to identify and address gaps in investigations, share new evidence and findings, monitor institutional conduct, and act as a watchdog to ensure other actors fulfil their responsibilities. The state's role is to ensure the executive, legislative, and judicial branches are all fulfilling their obligations to protect journalists and effectively investigate crimes against them.
- 10. Build capacity:** The safety initiative should also serve as a capacity- and knowledge-building resource for members and other stakeholders. In particular, it should help to identify which state and non-state actors, such as the judiciary and law enforcement, require capacity-building on issues related to freedom of expression – particularly the protection of journalists – as well as how to address these issues through an [intersectional gender lens](#). The initiative could also serve as a platform for journalists and members of the media community to directly share knowledge about their daily work and safety threats with state authorities, as a meaningful form of stakeholder engagement and awareness.

- 11. State and non-state collaboration:** It is unreasonable to expect one single initiative to bear sole responsibility for the safety of journalists. A safety mechanism should be only one among many measures to address the plethora of safety challenges that journalists face, including legislation and public policies. Educating and raising awareness of the role of the media in democratic societies must be a shared endeavour between state and non-state actors.
- 12. SMART goals:** Safety initiatives need to develop strategies and work plans that are SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound – through a participatory and transparent process. This will also ensure these mechanisms can be held accountable.

'A safety mechanism should be only one among many measures to address the plethora of safety challenges that journalists face'