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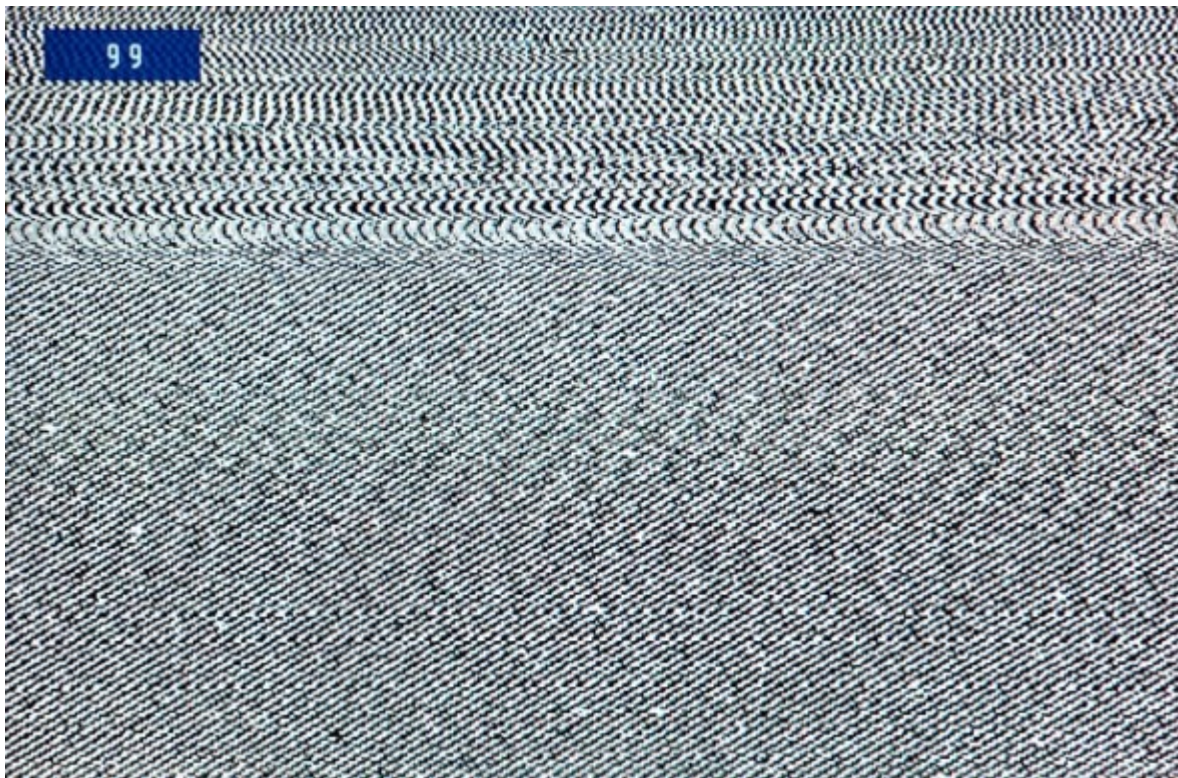
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The big Serbian information shutdown

By [Alexia Kalaitzi \(/contributors/alexia-kalaitzi/\)](/contributors/alexia-kalaitzi/) | [0 \(#comments\)](#)



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Are we losing Serbia?

That was a question that Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic did not expect to hear during a joint press conference he gave with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin last month.

'Will the affairs related to media censorship in Serbia stand in the country's way to the EU integration processes?' asked Natalija Miletic, a Serbian journalist who lives and works in Germany. A proper response wasn't given, and after the press conference Natalija was told by the Serbian embassy never to contact the embassy or dare to cover any similar event again. The next day, back in Serbia, Natalija was targeted by the tabloids, which referred to her as the 'Mystical Tits' (after her Twitter nickname) who attacked the Prime Minister.

'For me as a journalist, the question of censorship was THE question. Although they try to deny its existence, censorship is so present in Serbia,' Natalija says.

Natalija's story is one of the many examples of media censorship in Serbia. The shutdown of news websites, the removal of articles and blog posts, and cyber-attacks against journalists and bloggers have become an everyday reality. Dunja Mijatovic, who is the representative for freedom of the media at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe has already expressed her concerns about a worrying trend of online censorship during a week when the country was hit by severe and disastrous floods. During that week, censorship reached its peak. The government declared a 'state of emergency', which gave the authorities the opportunity to censor media and arrest citizens accused of 'inciting panic during a state of emergency' – merely because they were using Facebook to criticize the government's inefficiency in dealing with the floods. An article arguing that Vucic should resign has been removed, without any explanation, from the blog section of one of the most important daily newspapers, *Blic*. Other websites, such as Teleprompter, featuring similar content have been also blocked.

It is no secret that Vucic served as Minister of Information under Slobodan Milošević's regime in the late 1990s, nor that he [led the implementation \(http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsee/2014/06/02/serbia-is-the-freedom-of-the-press-endangered/\)](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsee/2014/06/02/serbia-is-the-freedom-of-the-press-endangered/) of the infamous Information Law, according to which the editors of all opposition media had to get their content approved by him before publication. 'Now he is smarter than that,' says journalist, blogger and co-founder of the independent media [Balkanist \(http://balkanist.net/\)](http://balkanist.net/), Srečko Šekeljic. 'What we have now is informal groups that impose pressure on independent authors and media. They are actually groups of "cyber-criminals" who organize DDoS [Distributed Denial of Service] attacks to shutdown websites, hack journalists' and authors' emails or troll internet users. It is exactly what happened to me.'

Srečko has published in English [research \(http://balkanist.net/getting-a-phd-in-serbia-has-never-been-easier-the-case-of-minister-of-internal-affairs-nebojsa-stefanovic/\)](http://balkanist.net/getting-a-phd-in-serbia-has-never-been-easier-the-case-of-minister-of-internal-affairs-nebojsa-stefanovic/) carried out by Serbian academics based in London, proving that fake doctorates have been awarded to public figures, including to the current Minister of Internal Affairs. The researchers worked through his dissertation and revealed that his work was 'heavily plagiarized and for this and other reasons fails to meet the criteria for a successful PhD'. The research team offered the story to many respectable online and print media in Serbia. Most editors refused to publish it, claiming that it didn't fit in with their editorial agenda or that their management had refused to publish the content. The only media that initially accepted the story was an independent news website named Pescanic. When the post was put online, Pescanic was attacked by hackers and remained unavailable for 10 days. One hacker created a fake email account in Srečko's name and sent messages to one of the researchers, asking to meet him in person in order to give him 'some valuable files'.

According to Srečko, this case is characteristic of the self-censorship of editors who are fearful of publishing any sensitive anti-government material. He underlines that the biggest problem for the Serbian media is their financial dependency on the state. In addition, many of the big advertisers are linked to the ruling party.

According to a recent report published by the Center for International Media Assistance, the state funding of media, estimated at between 23 and 40 per cent, is unregulated, unmonitored and non-transparent. The same report states that advertising contracts offered by Serbian state bodies often require that the media outlets broadcast or

publish interviews with state officials or print as news PR articles on the work of state organs or public enterprises. A typical example is TV Studio B, funded by Belgrade City Council to the tune of around 2.5 million euros last year. Monitoring of 10 of its news bulletins revealed that 47 per cent of the information sources were municipality leaders and 16 per cent were citizens. The strongest opposition party was not mentioned in any of them. With the advertising sector shrinking in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, Serbian media has become even more vulnerable to state financial support.

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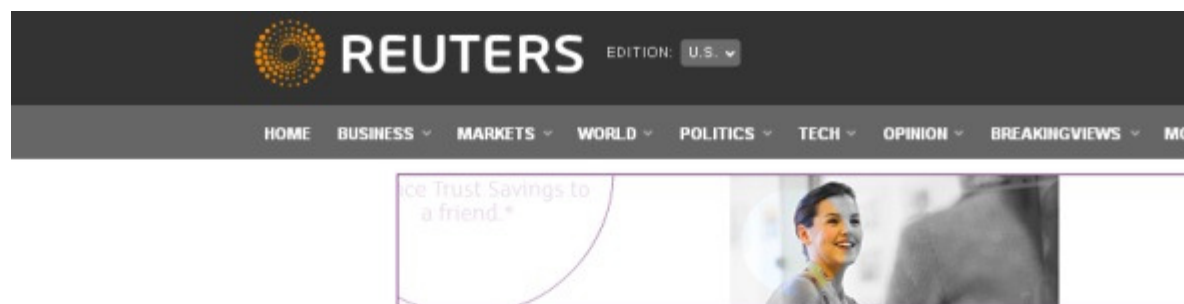
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