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## **Bosnia and Herzegovina: Human rights journalist faces defamation lawsuit for exposing corruption**

On 9 October 2024, human rights journalist **Sanja Vasković** was summoned to the Istočna Ilidža Police Station in East Sarajevo to be questioned in relation to the criminal offence of “defamation” under Article 208(a), paragraph 2, of the Law on Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Republika Srpska. The questioning was carried out on the basis of a complaint made by Mladen Kovačević the owner of the company MRAZ D.O.O, which is based in Pale. Republika Srpska’s Defamation Law came into force in July 2023.

[Sanja Vasković](#) is a woman human rights defender and an investigative journalist in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She is the owner and editor-in-chief of the online news portal [SPIN Info](#). After graduating from the University of East Sarajevo, Sanja Vasković worked in electronic media as well as writing columns for various news portals in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2019 she started an online news portal together with a fellow cameraman to ensure that she would be able to write freely. Since the foundation of SPIN Info, Sanja Vasković has reported on the misuse of public money, nepotism, and corruption in tenders and public institutions which has made her a target of powerful people. In May 2024, the Association of Journalists of Bosnia and Herzegovina awarded her ‘best journalist in written media.’

The articles published by SPIN Info focus on corruption, crime, human rights violations, non-transparent spending of public money and other issues that are of public interest in East Sarajevo, Republika Srpska. This puts the reporters of SPIN Info and Sanja Vasković at risk of being targeted by authorities in an attempt to silence them. SPIN Info are occasionally invited to the municipal assembly sessions and press conferences, and when they are able to attend, their questions are ignored or they are accused of having ulterior motives. The reporters receive threats and are verbally attacked for their work. In addition to attempts to discredit their reporting, their families are also targeted in order to intimidate the journalists.

On 8 October 2024, human rights journalist Sanja Vasković received a notification inviting her to appear at the Istočna Ilidža Police Station to give her statement as a suspect of a defamation investigation. The following day she went to the police station, accompanied by her lawyer. During her questioning she was told that businessman Mladen Kovačević had filed a complaint

against her, accusing her of slander and producing and publishing false accusations against him and his company MRAZ D.O.O. on the SPIN Info news portal.

The complaint was based on a series of news articles published by SPIN Info, including an [article](#) penned by the human rights journalist which was published on 3 October 2024, shortly before the local elections. The article's main focus was a mayoral candidate who was the former director of the Employment Agency of Republika Srpska. The article reported an alleged fraud attempt during his time in office, where employment support incentives were to be given to seven fictitious companies. The transfers were prevented and the money was never sent. The article also highlighted cooperation between the director and Mr. Kovačević, revealing that his company Mraz D.O.O. received a disputable 456,000 BAM (approx 233,150€) from the employment support program between 2021-2023. This fact was previously [reported](#) in detail by another journalist in his article for SPIN Info on 28 March 2024.

The article, which was based on public and private documents, lays out how Mr. Kovačević, together with the director of the Employment Agency, allegedly abused this support program by firing female workers from one company and then rehiring them in another one of his companies in order to benefit from subsidies granted by the support program for the employment of "new workers".

In March 2024, after the news report was published on the news portal, Mr. Kovačević repeatedly called the author, trying to convince him to change the way the article was written. This was despite the fact that Mr. Kovačević was given the opportunity to respond to the allegations before its release. Mr. Kovačević reportedly also threatened one of his former employees for speaking to SPIN Info.

When Sanja Vasković published her news report on 3 October, Mr. Kovačević called the human rights journalist and tried to prevent her from writing about him, accusing her of being his enemy and of issuing false reports. He threatened to report Sanja Vasković to the police, and when she refused to change or delete her report from the news portal, he filed a complaint with the police accusing the human rights journalist of the criminal offence of defamation.

Front Line Defenders condemns the attempts to intimidate and silent human rights journalist Sanja Vasković by initiating a lawsuit as well as verbal threats and pressure and calls for the investigation to be dismissed. Noting that press freedom is essential to a democratic open society, the organisation calls on the government of Republika Srpska to protect journalists, especially those who report on critical issues such as corruption, abuse of power and human rights violations from all types of intimidation, threats and legal harassment at all costs. Front Line Defenders expresses its grave concern that the defamation law is weaponised to silence the investigative journalism and critical voices.

### **Front Line Defenders calls the Republika Srpska authorities to:**

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1. Dismiss the ongoing police investigation into the human rights journalist Sanja Vasković which accuses her of defamation, as she was targeted solely for carrying out her role as a journalist;
2. Repeal the controversial defamation law which can be used to silence journalists and critical voices who expose corruption, abuse of power, and all types of human rights violations;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders, including investigative and human rights journalists in Republika Srpska can carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of attacks, including targeting, intimidation, physical or online attacks, and free from all restrictions and reprisals.