

Journalist safety guidance:

Covering the 2026 Serbian
elections



Election assignment planning

- Before an assignment, complete a written risk assessment to identify risks, assess how to mitigate those risks, and create contingency plans. Have a conversation with trusted colleagues or friends about your plans.
- Establish a communications protocol that includes check-ins, a point of contact, and a contingency plan for emergencies.
- Consider procuring goggles/glasses, face masks or a respirator, and a helmet in advance of large-scale demonstrations.
- Make sure you are mentally prepared for possible confrontations with aggressive individuals.
- Prepare in advance for online harassment by limiting what you post online, securing accounts, and making a plan with your newsroom, family, and friends for how you will respond to online abuse.



Editors' checklist

- Have a conversation with your reporting team before an assignment to understand their previous experience, level of safety training, and risk profile in the field. Put in place support mechanisms where you determine there may be more risk.
- Make sure no journalist is working alone in the field. If needed, partner with another news organization to ensure someone is monitoring journalists in the field at all times.
- Establish a regular check-in procedure with journalists on assignment and be clear about what they should do if they encounter threats or aggression, including who they should contact in an emergency.
- Decide what footage or other material will be needed to complete the assignment, and have a plan for the journalist to leave as soon as this is acquired.
- Discuss with the team what signs could indicate that they should withdraw and determine how they will communicate these triggers to each other.
- Have legal counsel on stand-by and share their contact information with your team.



Covering election protests

- Upon arriving at any location, identify evacuation routes and emergency rendezvous points, and have a plan for accessing your mode of transportation to leave the area.
- Maintain a low profile and gauge the mood of crowds toward the media before entering any situation. Consider if displaying logos from your news outlet or wearing press insignia may increase the risk of physical violence.
- Avoid working alone. If needed, partner with another news outlet or freelancers you trust.
- Continuously observe the mood and demeanor of the authorities. Visual cues such as police in riot gear or shield walls are potential indicators that aggression can be expected.
- Leave the area or pull back to a safe location when such “red flags” are evident.
- Determine in advance what footage or other material will be needed to complete the assignment and do not linger at a risky location.



On election day

- Ensure that you have the correct accreditation or press identification. Have it on display only if safe to do so.
- If possible, avoid carrying your personal phone with you and instead carry a phone with minimal personal information on it.
- Ensure you know the rules of what can and can't be reported on election day.
- Be prepared to retreat or leave if you notice potential signs of hostility such as someone filming you, repositioning towards you, or calling your name or outlet. Do not react or engage with any attempts to antagonize or confront you.
- If you are attacked and your equipment is grabbed, hand it over. Equipment is not worth your life. Immediately contact your editor to let them know what was taken and where.



Dealing with aggression

- If possible, try to build rapport with individuals around you when you arrive at the location.
- Maintain eye contact with an aggressor, use open, non-threatening hand gestures, and talk in a calming manner.
- Keep an extended arm's length from the threat. If someone grabs you, break away firmly and loudly draw attention to yourself and ask others for help.
- If the situation escalates, keep a hand free to protect your head and move with short, deliberate steps to avoid falling. If part of a team, stick together and link arms.
- Prioritize your safety. While there are times when documenting aggression can be newsworthy, taking pictures of aggressive individuals can escalate a situation.



Surveillance

- Ensure you have installed firmware updates on your phones and computers.
- Use a VPN and, if possible, Tor network for online communications or investigations.
- When possible, use Signal to communicate with colleagues and sources and set messages to delete every 12 hours at a minimum.
- Be aware that journalists and activists in Serbia have been targeted by advanced spyware. Research extra security steps you can take to protect yourself against spyware.
- If your device is seized by law enforcement, assume that it has been infected by spyware. Stop using the device, perform a full factory reset, and store it away from your daily activities.
- Assume your movements and conversations in public areas are being monitored and be mindful of exposing your sources if communicating in-person in a public space and/or around phones that may have been compromised.



Protecting against online attacks

- Remove from the internet information that can be used to confirm your identity, locate you, contact you via a means you do not want, be manipulated, or used to discredit you.
- Where possible, create separate personal and professional accounts on email and social media.
- Speak with family and friends about the threat of online abuse and about the type of information you do and do not want posted about you online.
- Talk to your editor or newsroom about the potential for online abuse and ask what support they can offer. This can include IT support to monitor your accounts, a statement of support to counteract a targeted campaign, or mental health resources.



Managing online attacks

- Try not to engage with those who harass you online, as this can make the situation worse.
- Consider making your social media accounts private or going offline for a period of time, and ask family members to do the same.
- Check for comments that may indicate that an online threat may escalate into a physical attack. If you feel unsafe at home, arrange alternative accommodation.
- Ask a newsroom colleague or trusted person to help you review your mentions or monitor your accounts.
- Document any comments you feel are threatening. Take screenshots of the comments, including the social media handle of the person who is threatening you.



Journalists should report any threats they encounter to their journalist association or to ANEM's 24/7 SOS Hotline for Journalists and Other Threatened Media Workers at 0800 100 115.

For more information about safely reporting during elections visit cpj.org/journalist-safety-elections/ and reach out for support at emergencies@cpj.org.

