

Targeting Journalists in Serbia: An Autoethnographic Analysis of Threats, Intimidation and Resistance

Dinko Gruhonjić, University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Philosophy, Department for Media Studies
dinko.gruhonjic@ff.uns.ac.rs

Introduction: Targeting Journalists and Professors in a Hybrid Regime

This text is not a research report. Nor is it a lawsuit, although it could be. It is an attempt to understand what happened to me. And what is happening to the country in which I live.

Since March 2024, as a journalist and professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, I have been the target of an organised persecution campaign. It was launched from the very top of the Serbian state, amplified through pro-regime media, and has never stopped. In this text, I trace that campaign from the inside: through the graffiti our children saw before me, through the panic button I carried for four months, through the institutions that chose silence.

I write using the method of evocative autoethnography – an approach in which the researcher uses their own bodily and emotional experience as material for understanding broader social and political patterns (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011).¹ I am simultaneously the researcher and the researched, both observer and observed: a journalist who reports on a hybrid regime, and a person whom that same regime targets. This dual position is not a methodological problem – it is the very essence of this text.

What this approach makes possible – and what conceptual analysis alone cannot – is a view from within. Not an abstract description of how authoritarian and democratic elements coexist, but a lived account of what that coexistence actually means: who drives the campaign, how the machinery operates, what it feels like to be on the receiving end of it.

A few notes on ethics. My family – my wife Saška, daughter Dunja, son David – appears in this text because they too are part of the story, not as background but as direct targets of the campaign. I wrote about them with their knowledge and consent. The colleagues and students I mention acted publicly, in public spaces, and their names are already part of the public record. Where they could have been exposed to risk, I chose not to include details.

¹ Evocative autoethnography as an approach involves engaging readers through intimate and emotional narratives that invite reflection and understanding of broader social and political realities. See Ellis, Carolyn / Adams, Tony E., and Arthur P. Bochner. 2011. Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12(1), 273–290.

Over the past decade, Serbia has become an example of what political scientists call a hybrid or competitive authoritarian regime – a formal democracy in which the ruling elite systematically undermines institutions, captures the media, and disciplines critical voices.² The targeting of journalists is not an accident in such a system – it is a method.³ This text is one example of that method, from the inside.

Writing from the Body: Graffiti on the Doorstep

The campaign that continues began literally on our doorstep. The graffiti our children saw before I did is not mere vandalism – they are the first material evidence that targeting had crossed from the public into the private sphere.

It was Thursday, 21 March 2024, and our daughter Dunja was on her way to school that morning. Still half-asleep, she was jolted awake by the sight of graffiti spray-painted in black on the façade of our building in Novi Sad – written in Cyrillic: “Dinko – Šakić is waiting to welcome you to your eternal home,” signed “Serbian Vojvodina”.⁴ She called her mother, Saška, who had already left for work. Through tears, she told her: “They’ve written graffiti again...” Dunja was seventeen at the time.

That word – *again* – referred to 24 November 2020, when both the façade and the entrance door of our building had been covered in chauvinist graffiti directed at me.⁵ That time, it was our son David who saw it first – a twenty-one-year-old student at the time – early in the morning, on his way to fieldwork. Written in red spray paint, in Cyrillic: “You Ustaša scum, this is not your city or your country,” “Ratko Mladić – Serbian hero,” then once more “Ratko Mladić”⁶, then “You stinking stable hand,”⁷ accompanied by several chauvinist and neo-Nazi symbols directed at me. What exactly provoked this attack, I cannot say with certainty. It may have been our report for the VOICE portal about graffiti glorifying Ratko Mladić.⁸

But this second round of graffiti had far graver and more dangerous consequences. And it still does.

To understand why, one must go back to March 2024 and the place where a “truth” about me was fabricated.

For the past several years, I have been a regular participant in the Human Rights Festival “Zna-DU” (formerly “Rebedu”) in Dubrovnik, Croatia. It is a festival organised philanthropically by Dubrovnik entrepreneur Željka Savka Vrtikapa, who studied in Sarajevo during the war and was wounded by shrapnel from a grenade. Every year she gathers around a hundred guests from across the post-Yugoslav region – artists, journalists

² Bieber, Florian. 2020. *The rise of authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan; Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. 2010. *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Kmezić, Marko. 2018. Captured media: Limitations and structural hindrances to media freedom in Serbia. *Review of Central and East European Law* 43(4), 457–482.

³ According to the 2026 World Press Freedom Index, Serbia ranks 104th out of 180 countries – a drop of eight places from the previous year – and is classified as a country where the situation is “difficult.” See Reporters Without Borders. 2026. *World Press Freedom Index: Serbia* (accessed: 3 May 2026).

⁴ Nova.rs. 2024. [Nove pretnje Dinku Gruhonjiću na ulazu zgrade u kojoj živi](#). *Nova.rs*, 21 March 2024.

⁵ YIHR.rs. 2020. [Grafiti mržnje usmereni protiv Gruhonjića: Nasilnici seju strah po Srbiji, država ćutanjem odobrava](#). *YIHR*, 24 November 2020.

⁶ Ratko Mladić was convicted in first instance to life imprisonment in 2017. The verdict became final in 2021. He was found guilty of genocide in Srebrenica, crimes against humanity, and violations of the laws or customs of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

⁷ The expression “Austrian stable hands” was used as a derogatory term for Slovenes in the late 1980s and early 1990s on media under the control of Slobodan Milošević. Milošević was tried on charges of war crimes and genocide before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). He was transferred to the Tribunal’s custody in 2001 and died there in 2006 before a verdict was reached.

⁸ VOICE. 2020. [Novi Sad – nacionalšovinistička palanka koja slavi genocid?](#) *Voice*, 14 November 2020.

and activists, all deeply committed anti-fascists, including Boris Dežulović, Zoran Predin, Florence Hartmann, Rade Šerbedžija and Ana Lalić, to name just a few.

Alongside socialising, the festival hosts panel discussions, film screenings and theatre performances. In March 2024, I did not speak as part of the festival programme, but I reported and wrote for the Beta News Agency from Belgrade⁹ and the Autonomija portal from Novi Sad.¹⁰

When we returned to Novi Sad, a series of threats began against the president of the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV), Ana Lalić, because of her critical statements at the festival. Pro-regime media and officials accused her of being “a Ustaša woman” and “anti-Serbian,” targeted her on grounds of ethnic origin, and sent misogynistic abuse and rape threats. This went on for a week.

And then they turned to me.

A deepfake video of my appearance at the Dubrovnik festival from the previous year, 2023, appeared on social media.¹¹ My talk had been edited to make it sound as though I was pleased to share a name with one of the commanders of the notorious Ustaša concentration camp of Jasenovac, Dinko Šakić. And then everything began, and has never stopped.¹²

The social media narrative was very quickly taken up by the regime's leadership. Milenko Jovanov, a senior official of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), used the parliamentary floor to publicly brand me a “Ustaša”.¹³ Following his address, someone spray-painted an ominous black graffiti on the façade of the building where I live with my family. That evening, around a hundred friends, students and colleagues came to whitewash the wall. Provocateurs also arrived to “guard” the graffiti, as did a “neighbour” who drove his SUV through the crowd. Two police officers stood by – not to protect us, but to protect them.

That same evening, someone spray-painted in red on the freshly whitewashed wall: “Džaba si krećio” – “Your whitewashing was in vain.” That inscription stands to this day, but covered – at the start of the student protests – by imprints of bloody hands.¹⁴

The University as a Battlefield: Blockade, Rector, Senate, the Kleut Case, STAV

After the graffiti came death threats – by phone, messages, and social media. Relentlessly. All of this was accompanied by pro-regime media and senior state officials, who continuously incited hatred against me and called me a “Ustaša”. It was clear that the lynching campaign had been launched from the very top of the state, including statements by the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. And it was not directed at me alone. It was directed at my family.

The campaign soon demonstrated that not even the university in a hybrid regime is an autonomous institution – it is an instrument. The blockade of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, where I am employed, lasted from 28 March to 1 April 2024. It was called by the

⁹ I have worked for this private regional news agency since 1997.

¹⁰ This portal is published by the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV).

¹¹ AFP Provera činjenica. 2024. [Izmenjeni snimak sa konferencije iz 2023. godine podstiče napade na Dinko Gruhonjića](#). *AFP Provera činjenica*, 26 March 2024; Raskrikavanje 2024. [Obmanujuće isečen video kao dokaz da jedan Dinko veliča drugog](#). *Raskrikavanje*, 20 March 2024.

¹² The labelling of journalists as “foreign mercenaries” and “enemies of the state” as an instrument of delegitimation is a documented pattern in Serbia under the SNS. See Dragojlov, Aleksandra. 2025. Influence of political clientelism on media freedom under Vucic and the Progressive Party. *Nationalities Papers* 54(2), 391–407.

¹³ N1 Info. 2024. [NDNV: Milenko Jovanov ugrožava živote novinara i njihovih porodica](#). *N1 info*, 20 March 2024.

¹⁴ Moj Novi Sad. 2025. [Krvave šake u znak podrške Dinku Gruhonjicu](#). *Moj Novi Sad*, 15 January 2025.

student Vice-Rector Damjan Vakanjac¹⁵ and the President of the Student Parliament of the Faculty of Philosophy, Ivana Macak¹⁶, after this grouping issued an ultimatum demanding my dismissal.

A group of several dozen people – among whom, according to analyses by independent media, very few were actual students of the Faculty of Philosophy – blockaded the building for four days, demanding my dismissal for alleged “hate speech”. One of the blockers wore a T-shirt bearing the likeness of Milorad Ulemek Legija¹⁷, the convicted organiser of the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, former commander of the Unit for Special Operations (JSO).¹⁸ This young man held a banner reading “Moj sinko samo nikad kao Dinko” – “My dear son, just never be like Dinko.”¹⁹

The blockade was ended by University Rector Dejan Madić²⁰, who came to the Faculty of Philosophy and negotiated a suspension of the blockade. According to independent media and eyewitnesses, before the Rector and his associates arrived on site, unknown individuals brought a large number of student ID cards to those blocking the faculty, which they used to pose in front of the building while the Rector addressed the media. The Rector was accompanied by the Deans of the Faculty of Technical Sciences, Boris Dumnić²¹, and the Dean of the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, Patrik Drid.²² All three insulted me. The Rector most loudly.²³

Dejan Madić became Rector of the University of Novi Sad despite suspicions that he had falsified his bibliography and passed off the work of a colleague with the same name from a faculty in Niš as his own.²⁴

While the faculty building was under blockade, colleagues who stood in solidarity organised rallies in support of me in front of the building.²⁵ These were “Rallies for the Defence of the Autonomy of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad and in Support of Professor and Journalist Dinko Gruhonjić”. “This is no longer the issue of one professor – it is the issue of all professors and students,” declared the then Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, Ivana Živančević Sekeruš.

Jelena Kleut, one of the participants in the rallies for the defence of faculty autonomy and in support of me, said in early spring 2024: “This is the twilight of a state that cannot guarantee

¹⁵ N1 Info. 2024. [Na blokadi FTN viđen i student prorektor Damjan Vakanjac, snimao studente](#). *N1 info*, 9 December 2024.

¹⁶ Autonomija. 2024. [Sa blokade Filozofskog u Skupštinu Novog Sada: Ivana Macak prva na listi Ruske stranke](#). *Autonomija*, 30 April 2024; N1 Info. 2024. [Studentima posao u Skupštini Vojvodine: A u CV-ju disciplinska prijava, blokade, Ruska stranka](#). *N1 info*, 15 July 2024.

¹⁷ Milorad Ulemek Legija was sentenced to multiple maximum terms of 40 years’ imprisonment: as the organiser of the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić (2003); for the kidnapping and murder of President Ivan Stambolić (2000); for the attempted assassination of opposition leader Vuk Drašković (2000) and the assassination of SPO officials (1999).

¹⁸ The JSO (“red berets”) was an elite covert operations unit of the State Security Department (RDB) of the Serbian Ministry of the Interior. RDB chiefs Jovica Stanišić and Franko Simatović “Frenki” were convicted before the Hague Tribunal for the JSO’s role in the wars in Croatia and Bosnia. The JSO was dissolved in March 2003 following its involvement in the assassination of Prime Minister Đinđić.

¹⁹ Danas. 2024. [Bičevanje Filozofskog fakulteta: Legija u holu](#). *Danas*, 31 March 2024.

²⁰ Istinomer. 2024. [Vučićev ansambl: Dejan Madić](#). *Istinomer*, 12 December 2024.

²¹ Danas. 2024. [Dekan FTN-a i potpisnik podrške Aleksandru Vučiću: ko je Boris Dumnić?](#) *Danas*, 10 December 2024.

²² Danas. 2024. [Spisak imena: podrška listi Aleksandar Vučić](#). *Danas*, 8 December 2024.

²³ YouTube. [Obraćanje rektora Madića ispred Filozofskog fakulteta](#) (accessed: 2 April 2024).

²⁴ NIN. 2026. [Doktori nauka taoci rektora Madić: Sporne prakse prvog čoveka Univerziteta u Novom Sadu](#). *NIN*, 18 February 2026.

²⁵ Slobodna Evropa. 2024. [U Novom Sadu skup za odbranu autonomije Filozofskog fakulteta i podrške Dinku Gruhonjiću](#). *Slobodna Evropa*, 29 March 2024.

the right to work and education.” Jelena Kleut lost her position at the faculty in January 2026²⁶, after the University Senate refused to elect her to the rank of full professor. I know Jelena well, and I can testify: she is one of the finest scholars I know. Her departure left the Department without its only doctor of communication sciences and without the person who had stood by the students from the very first day of the student protests – loudly and without hesitation. Jelena is, without doubt, a victim of political persecution.

Chants of “Dinko, get out!” echoed from our faculty building. The Dean of the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics (PMF), Milica Pavkov Hrvojević, and a handful of her colleagues and students supported me.

The others were silent.

In the adjacent Rectorate building, the University Senate was convening at the same time. The Senate rejected the request of Faculty of Philosophy Dean Ivana Živančević Sekeruš to take a position on the blockade and my persecution. The Dean left the Senate session in protest, joined by the Dean of PMF. As the two Deans later recounted, one of the Senate members – who would himself later be persecuted by the regime – said to them as they were leaving the session: “Whatever you do, Dinko will hang.” Vice-Rector for International Cooperation Sabina Halupka Rešetar resigned from that position as early as 2 April 2024, the day after the blockade ended.

Doroteja Antić, then a fourth-year student of communication and public relations at the Faculty of Philosophy, said that students were ready to stand by me “for as long as necessary.” Doroteja is a member of the student group STAV (Students Against Authoritarian Rule – Studenti protiv autoritarne vlasti), an informal organisation of University of Novi Sad students, founded on 1 February 2024. Their work focuses on combating corruption in student elections, raising the political awareness of young people, and resisting the authoritarian regime.

STAV members blockaded the Rectorate building in Novi Sad for two weeks in the summer of 2024 to prevent, in their words, irregular elections for the Student Parliament of the Faculty of Philosophy, where only one list close to the regime was on offer. During the 2024 blockades, STAV activists were victims of violence. In September 2024, an explosive device was thrown at them in front of the Rectorate, and two students – Mila Pajić and Srđan Đurić – were injured in a confrontation with unknown men dressed in black.

Since 2025, twelve Novi Sad activists, including members of STAV and the Movement of Free Citizens, have faced serious charges of “preparing acts against the constitutional order”. The key piece of evidence is a recording of a private conversation illegally made by the Serbian security service (BIA), subsequently broadcast on pro-regime television in mid-March 2025, two days before the major rally in Belgrade organised by students. Six student activists from STAV and the opposition Movement of Free Citizens were arrested and spent seven and a half months in pre-trial detention. Six students, including Doroteja Antić, are currently in exile as arrest warrants have been issued for them.²⁷ At the time of their arrest, they were attending the “Zna-DU” Festival in Dubrovnik, to which they had been invited months earlier.

²⁶ Vreme. 2026. [The case of Jelena Kleut: Punishing the disobedient](#). *Vreme*, 16 January 2026.

²⁷ Moj Novi Sad. 2025. [Kako smo nastali, kad smo obeleženi, zašto je organizovan sastanak zbog kog nam je narušena bezbednost](#). *Moj Novi Sad*, 22 March 2025.

Institutional Inertia and Procedural Formalism: I Am Safe, I Carry a Panic Button in My Pocket

As the lynching campaign escalated, we turned to the institutions that were legally obliged to protect us. What we received was a lesson in what a captured state means from the inside.

We spent all our time on self-defence – alerting the public, embassies, and European institutions. We requested security assessments from the police for both me and Ana Lalić. The police stalled.

It was clear that we were not safe. We decided there was no point in waiting for the police: cameras exist at the entrance to our building (we installed them after the first graffiti in 2020), those responsible – the people who had painted the graffiti – were known to us, and the police “could not find them.” The campaign against me was led by senior state officials, which makes it easy to understand why the police were not doing their job. We were assisted by the European Federation of Journalists, which arranged surveillance through a private security firm. I received a panic button. I carried it for four months, every time I left the flat. You press it – it calls private security, they call the police. In theory. On the street, I was insulted and threatened. I never pressed the button. I trusted myself more than the police, who would “intervene urgently.”

There was also an occasion when all four of us – Dunja, David, Saška and I – were insulted on the street. It was too much. I managed to obtain a grant from an international journalist protection organisation and was relocated out of Serbia for two months in the summer of 2024.

In the meantime, after nearly two months of waiting, our lawyer received a call from the police: an official, almost robotic voice coldly informed him that the assessment had concluded I was “safe.” While he was telling me this, my fingers in the pocket of my jeans were unconsciously and convulsively tightening around the plastic of the panic button.²⁸

After my return, the threats gradually subsided – only to return periodically in waves. Today, more than two years after the start of the lynching campaign, it continues. Barely a day passes without my being mentioned on pro-regime media as a “Ustaša,” a leader of the student and civic protests, a leader of the opposition, and so on. My face appears so frequently on pro-regime television that I have become widely recognised: I bitterly joke that I am an “inverted Severina”, a celebrity recognised everywhere.²⁹ But this is dangerous. You never know who you will meet on the street, or what they are carrying in their pocket. I therefore move around very cautiously. If I go out for a walk or to a café in the evening, I always have male friends accompanying me. I am aware that if the state has decided to kill someone, it will do so. Perhaps this is why friends and colleagues who have not seen me for some time greet me first with: “Are you still alive?” On the other hand, many people on the street express their support and solidarity with me. Of the people who matter to me, not one has distanced themselves.

²⁸ On the concept of “procedural formalism” and institutional inertia see Bieber, Florian. 2020. *The rise of authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan; Anderson, Rosemarie. 2001. Embodied writing and reflections on embodiment. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 33(2), 83–98.

²⁹ Severina Vučković is one of the most prominent pop stars in the former Yugoslav region, whose decades-long career is marked by transgenerational popularity and a high degree of regional recognition. In musicological and cultural studies analyses, her work is considered a key example of contemporary Balkan pop music, characterised by a fusion of Western production standards and local ethno-melodic elements.

Family as Target: How Am I? Fine – Like a Ticking Nuclear Bomb

When people ask how I am, I say I am subjectively fine, while objectively, things are as they are. We are all well in the family, together. The children are abroad – and for that, I admit, we are relieved.

I sometimes feel like a ticking nuclear bomb. I try to socialise only with people whose company I enjoy – other encounters, apart from professional ones, I avoid. I am afraid of my own reaction if someone provokes me. The mantra I repeat: I must stay focused. For the family. For my own safety. I welcome opportunities to travel outside Serbia and accept almost any such opportunity. Because then I can walk the streets freely. I think it is only human that I would like to leave Serbia. “Hats off to you for enduring all this,” a man at a petrol station said to me recently and shook my hand firmly. I endure. What will happen – I do not know, there is no point thinking about it.

And yes, I am trying to control my anger. Because, like a ticking nuclear bomb, I am afraid I might physically harm someone, which is one of the things the regime desires, without doubt. In April of this year, I shouted at a “neighbour” who accused David and Dunja of scratching his car. I ran down to the car park and shouted at him – loudly enough for the whole neighbourhood to hear. I knew what he said was untrue. But I also shouted because I know what these “neighbours” are like. I knew he was a provocateur.

And that I am being followed. Last summer, while I was at the seaside, a pro-regime tabloid even published a photograph of me on a beach in Pula. So, in police parlance, I am “under active surveillance” by the Serbian secret service.

I am particularly sensitive regarding my children, as any parent would be. So far, Dunja and Saška have not been seriously targeted in pro-regime media, although there have been rape threats. David has been accused by pro-regime tabloids of being an agent of the Croatian Security and Intelligence Agency (SOA).³⁰ The then Serbian Ambassador to Zagreb, Jelena Milić, also joined this campaign, which prompted me to request protection for David from Croatian authorities.³¹

The logic of a lynching campaign: when direct pressure on the journalist fails to produce results, they strike at those you care about most.

When people ask how the family is coping with all this, I say they should ask them – I cannot speak on their behalf. We went to family psychotherapy together. Saška long asked when this would end. I think she has managed to come to terms with it. The children – I do not know. I am only certain that it is not easy for them. Especially when they are abroad, as they usually are, and then hear that a new campaign has been launched against their father. For example, the Minister of Culture, Nikola Selaković, said in April of this year that I am “as if made for something terrible to happen to me.”³²

The children worry because they are not with us. They, too, would like us all to be together – but abroad.

I will never forgive anyone for my children’s tears.

³⁰ Alo. 2025. *Sabahudin zvani “Dinko” i David Gruhonjić u raljama hrvatske službe*. *Alo*, 14 January 2025.

³¹ Nacional.hr. 2025. *Zaštita za sina. Zbog srpske veleposlanice u Hrvatskoj Dinko Gruhonjić pisao Plenkoviću, Milanoviću i Grlić Radmanu*. *Nacional.hr*, 3 January 2025.

³² Danas. 2026. *EFJ: Ministar Selaković poziva na linč novinara Dinka Gruhonjića*. *Danas*, 22 March 2026; Cenzolovka. 2026. *Anem alarm: Necivilizovane i opasne izjave ministra i poslanika SNS na sednici skupštine, reči lako mogu postati meci*. *Cenzolovka*, 22 April 2026.

Around the time of the faculty blockade in 2024, we relocated to Budapest for a few days to try to detoxify. We were sitting in a restaurant garden when we turned on the live broadcast of the Rector's address in front of our Faculty of Philosophy building in Novi Sad. We were shocked and desperate. In front of me was a warm Hungarian goulash. At the moment we turned on the broadcast, that piece of meat in my mouth lost all taste: it turned into a dry, wooden mass that my throat refuses to swallow.³³

We embraced and wept. I said, "I am sorry." They said I had nothing to be sorry for.

We have learned not to follow what the pro-regime media write about us. We do not look at comments. We only receive what friends send us – when they judge it dangerous enough that we need to know.

Who Am I: Background, Grandmother Savka and the Label of "Ustaša"

To understand why the label "Ustaša" in my case is not merely an insult but a particularly cynical one, it is necessary to know who I am and where I come from.

For nearly thirty years, I have been a journalist covering the wartime past and Serbia's responsibility for war crimes from the 1990s. I have always received threats and abuse – periodically, and sometimes *en masse*.

Almost none of these threats have had a legal outcome. I have learned that this is not a coincidence – it is a message.³⁴ I have occasionally taken civil cases to court and won against those who threatened me, including individuals from the later officially banned neo-Nazi group Nacionalni stroj. There have been, and continue to be, cases in which I am suing pro-regime media.

Before I was branded a "Ustaša", since 2005, I had been called "Sabahudin" in chauvinist circles. Apparently, they were unclear about my nationality and went digging through my family tree. Since I come from a "mixed" marriage – I like to joke that this is because my father was a man and my mother a woman – and my name and surname are apparently neutral to chauvinist ears, when they "discovered" my father's name, they concluded I was Bosniak and therefore surely could not be Dinko, so they invented that my name was Sabahudin. I have nothing against Sabahudin. But I privately sued both a neo-Nazi and an informer – because their intention was clear: to denounce me ethnically as a Bosniak, in a country that knows very well what it did to Bosniaks. At the trial, their lawyers demanded I submit a birth certificate extract to establish my "real" name. I submitted it. Then they demanded all amendments since birth. I submitted them. They withdrew the evidence. They lost the case.

All these threats and abuses I regarded as an "occupational hazard." Until March 2024. Since then, it is no longer an "occupational hazard." It is a threat to my life.

I spoke about why and how I received the name Dinko on N1 Television, in the programme "Da sam ja neko" ("If I Were Someone").³⁵ I told the story of how, as a teenager, I joked with my late mother and asked her why she had given me the name Dinko, since that was the name of the commander of Jasenovac. My mother told me she had not thought of it that

³³ On embodied writing as a method see Anderson, *Embodied writing* and Hoffman, Kristen Garramone. 2025. *Breath, body, and the blank page: An autoethnographic approach to embodied writing practices*. PhD-thesis. St. John's University.

³⁴ On the systematic impunity for attacks on journalists in Serbia and captured media, see Kmezić, Marko. 2018. *Captured Media: Limitations and Structural Hindrances to Media Freedom in Serbia*. *Review of Central and East European Law* 43(4), 457–482.

³⁵ YouTube. *Da sam ja neko - Dinko Gruhonjić (N1 televizija)* (accessed: 31 January 2024).

way – she liked the name because she had read the works of the writer Dinko Šimunović. I told her it was not enough that she herself shared a name with Šakić’s wife, Nada – I too had to be Dinko. The programme aired two months before the start of the media lynching campaign. Nobody paid attention at the time. Probably because there was nothing to fabricate.

The 2023 Dubrovnik panel came immediately after the presentation of Viktor Ivančić’s book “Točka na U” (“Dot on the U”) – a study of the trial of Dinko Šakić and of how that trial served to relativise Ustaša crimes in Croatia in the late 1990s. I naturally followed on with the anecdote about Sabahudin and Dinko. Had I actually said what the deepfake fabricated, I would have been promptly expelled from an anti-fascist festival.

For as long as I can remember, I have despised fascists. I was raised as a Yugoslav in the spirit of brotherhood and unity. As a child, I was not afraid of monsters under the bed – I was afraid of Ustaše and Chetniks.

My mother’s family were Partisans. My grandmother, Savka, was widowed before the Second World War. She had three daughters, of whom Dušanka, the eldest, was a member of the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (SKOJ)³⁶ while still a secondary school student. Aunt Dušanka went “into the forest” at the very start of the war – that is, she became a Partisan and fought against the occupiers and domestic traitors such as the Ustaše and Chetniks throughout the war. Grandmother Savka was left alone with two daughters – Dragica, then thirteen, and my mother, Nada, who was eight years old. Grandmother was an illegal operative: goods for “the forest” passed through her. The Ustaše frequently detained and beat her. She barely survived the war in Banja Luka. My mother’s close relative, the pre-war teacher Bogdan Crnobrnja from Pakrac, launched the Partisan uprising on Papuk.³⁷

On my father’s side, my great-uncle Osman Gruhonjić was a delegate of the Land Anti-Fascist Council of the People’s Liberation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ZAVNOBiH).³⁸ Alongside Osman Gruhonjić, several other members of the Gruhonjić family – primarily from Janja near Bijeljina – participated in the People’s Liberation Struggle (NOB) as part of the Partisan movement.

How the Body Remembers Fear: Autoethnography and the Chilling Effect

Why autoethnography? Because no other format would be truthful.

A journalistic report would require distance. An academic study would require objectivity. But the persecution I have lived through is neither distant nor objective – it is inscribed in my reflexes, in my habits, in the way I walk down the street. Anderson (2001) writes that the body registers and remembers experience before the mind manages to analyse it. That is true. My body knew I was living under siege before I consciously admitted it to myself.

³⁶ Since the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was banned during the dictatorship in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in the interwar period, communist activity was illegal, activists were subject to continuous persecution and frequently sentenced to long prison terms.

³⁷ After the war he became, together with Josip Broz Tito, one of the main architects of the Non-Aligned Movement, Tito’s secretary-general and the ambassador of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to New Delhi and Washington.

³⁸ ZAVNOBiH (the Land Anti-Fascist Council of the People’s Liberation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) was constituted on 25 November 1943 in Mrkonić Grad as the supreme legislative body of the anti-fascist movement in BiH. Through its sessions of 1943–1944, Bosnian statehood was restored within the Yugoslav federation, defining it as an equal federal unit. At its Third Session (26 April 1945, Sarajevo) it was transformed into the People’s Assembly of BiH.

There is also a paradox in the fact that a journalist who has spent a lifetime writing about others must become his own subject. For thirty years, I reported on war crime victims, on persecutions, on the silence of institutions. I knew what this looked like from the inside – or I thought I did. Autoethnography helped me admit to myself that I did not. That there is a difference between understanding someone’s experience and living it.

Evocative autoethnography (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011) insists on this closeness between the researcher and experience, because it is closeness – not distance – that enables understanding of patterns of intimidation that do not appear in statistics but are felt in every step taken outside. I wrote this text out of a need to try to confront the fear, the trauma, not to write about them. That difference is not stylistic; it is methodological and political.

I am also aware of the limitations of this approach. This is my perspective: one angle from one person who is the target of one campaign in one country. Saška, Dunja and David have their own experiences that I cannot fully convey, and I have consciously refrained from doing so. The colleagues I mention have their own voices. This text is not testimony on their behalf, but testimony on my own, with the hope that it will help the reader understand something that goes beyond my individual case.

What Schauer (1978) calls the “chilling effect” is not merely a legal concept – it is a description of the everyday life of a journalist or professor in a hybrid regime. Disciplining comes before violence. The first goal is not to kill the journalist or professor, but to silence them, to isolate them, to turn them into a person who censors themselves, to destroy their integrity, to make the public and students distrust and recoil from them. Writing this text is an act of resistance to that disciplining. Publishing it is another – and a more important one.

Conclusion Without an Epilogue: Personal Trauma as a Symptom of a Captured State

The graffiti on the façade of my building and a captured state are not two different stories. This is an attempt to show why they are one.

Imagining my children standing before those words on the wall of our building, I feel the world breaking apart. The family is not collateral damage – it is the target. That is the way you break a person who refuses to be silenced. As a parent, I felt a paralysing rage.

When the tabloids and regime officials began spreading the deepfake video, the goal was not only my discreditation. They drew in the family too. That constant feeling of a ticking nuclear bomb in my stomach, the rage that suffocates me, the hypervigilance that accompanies me every day – this is not a personal problem. It is the chilling effect inscribed in the body, turning every step outside into an act of survival.³⁹

As I listened to the insults of Rector Madić, I felt the ground slipping from under my feet. My physical exhaustion and the sense that my own university had betrayed me were not merely an emotional breakdown – they were confirmation that the institution is no longer a shield. It has become a bureaucratic regime shell that simulates order.⁴⁰

In those days of March and April 2024, I was on the edge of a nervous breakdown. The students saved me. When they let me know they were signing a petition of support, I felt my

³⁹ Schauer, Frederick. 1978. Fear, risk, and the First Amendment: Unraveling the “chilling effect”. *Boston University Law Review* 76(5), 685–732; Anderson, *Embodied writing*.

⁴⁰ Bieber; *The rise of authoritarianism*; Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. 2010. *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

sanity returning. That was the community Aleksandra Knežević writes about – the moment when you feel that you are not alone in an empty, hostile city.⁴¹

“My” graffiti has survived many layers. Whitewashed over. Then a new one, in blood-red paint: “Džaba si krećio” – “Your whitewashing was in vain.” Covered by the bloody handprints of the student uprising. My façade has become a wall of remembrance for all of us.

But the label “Ustaša” does not only strike at my profession – it strikes at the bones of my family history. My grandmother Savka was detained and beaten by the Ustaše. Today I am called an Ustaša by their ideological grandchildren. That irony is not an academic figure of speech. It hurts.⁴²

There is a profound, unbearable dissonance in the fact that the grandchildren and ideological heirs of those who persecuted my grandmother stigmatise me with precisely the label she gave everything to oppose. While I carry her defiance in my body, public discourse tries to annihilate me – to turn me into the executioner of my own family.

When the students covered the graffiti on our façade with bloody handprints, my wall ceased to be only mine. It became part of something greater. My story and their story are the same story – about a state in which human life is worth less than loyalty to the regime. About what it costs to refuse to be silent.

I want to be explicit about one more thing this text does. Scholars of hybrid regimes analyse the balance between democratic and authoritarian elements. But from where I stand – from inside the campaign, inside the fear, inside the silence of institutions – that balance is simply not visible. There is no balance. There is only the apparatus and the person it is aimed at. Perhaps that is what autoethnography uniquely offers: not a better theory of hybrid regimes, but a corrective to theory's blind spots.

Have I stopped writing and speaking in public? I have not stopped. They would want that – and that is among the reasons I will not. Journalism is not just a job; it is part of what I am. In March and April 2024, I did not lose my job. But I will – as will Jelena Kleut and many others who publicly stood by the students. This will continue until the regime is brought down. I have never had any illusions about this regime: these are people who were personally protagonists of the policy of war crimes and genocide of Slobodan Milošević. Evil has returned home. But evil will not disappear if we turn a blind eye to it. Those who perpetrate violence feed on fear and grow ever more bloodthirsty.

I wrote before. I write now. I will write later.

There is no epilogue. The story continues.

Note on author:

Dinko Gruhonjić is Associate Professor of Journalism at the Department for Media Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, Serbia. He is also Programme Director of the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV), Editor-in-Chief of the investigative portal VOICE, and a member of PEN Centre Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2024, he received the Human Rights Award of the City of Weimar. His research interests include media freedom, hybrid regimes, war crimes accountability journalism, and minority-language media in the Western Balkans.

⁴¹ Knežević, Aleksandra. 2025. An autoethnographic account of the anti-corruption student protests in Serbia 2024/25. *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 12(1), 51–61.

⁴² Hoffman, *Breath, body, and the blank page*.

References

- AFP Provera činjenica. 2024. Izmenjeni snimak sa konferencije iz 2023. godine podstiče napade na Dinka Gruhonjića. *AFP Provera činjenica*, 26 March 2024.
- Alo. 2025. Sabahudin zvani "Dinko" i David Gruhonjić u raljama hrvatske službe. *Alo*, 14 January 2025.
- Anderson, Rosemarie. 2001. Embodied writing and reflections on embodiment. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 33(2), 83–98.
- Autonomija. 2024. Sa blokade Filozofskog u Skupštinu Novog Sada: Ivana Macak prva na listi Ruske stranke. *Autonomija*, 30 April 2024.
- Bieber, Florian. 2020. *The rise of authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cenzolovka. 2026. Anem alarm: Necivilizovane i opasne izjave ministra i poslanika SNS na sednici skupštine, reči lako mogu postati meci. *Cenzolovka*, 22 April 2026.
- Danas. 2024. Bičevanje Filozofskog fakulteta: Legija u holu. *Danas*, 31 March 2024.
- . 2024. Spisak imena: podrška listi Aleksandar Vučić. *Danas*, 8 December 2024.
- . 2024. Dekan FTN-a i potpisnik podrške Aleksandru Vučiću: ko je Boris Dumnić? *Danas*, 10 December 2024.
- . 2026. EFJ: Ministar Selaković poziva na linč novinara Dinka Gruhonjića. *Danas*, 22 March 2026.
- Dragojlov, Aleksandra. 2025. Influence of political clientelism on media freedom under Vucic and the Progressive Party. *Nationalities Papers* 54(2), 391–407.
- Ellis, Carolyn / Adams, Tony E., and Arthur P. Bochner. 2011. Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12(1), 273–290.
- Hoffman, Kristen Garramone. 2025. *Breath, body, and the blank page: An autoethnographic approach to embodied writing practices*. PhD-thesis. St. John's University.
- Istinomer. 2024. Vučičev ansambl: Dejan Madić. *Istinomer*, 12 December 2024.
- Kmezić, Marko. 2018. Captured media: Limitations and structural hindrances to media freedom in Serbia. *Review of Central and East European Law* 43(4), 457–482.
- Knežević, Aleksandra. 2025. An autoethnographic account of the anti-corruption student protests in Serbia 2024/25. *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 12(1), 51–61.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. 2010. *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moj Novi Sad. 2025. Krvave šake u znak podrške Dinku Gruhonjicu. *Moj Novi Sad*, 15 January 2025.
- . 2025. Kako smo nastali, kad smo obeleženi, zašto je organizovan sastanak zbog kog nam je narušena bezbednost. *Moj Novi Sad*, 22 March 2025.
- N1 Info. 2024. NDNV: Milenko Jovanov ugrožava živote novinara i njihovih porodica. *N1 info*, 20 March 2024.
- . 2024. Studentima posao u Skupštini Vojvodine: A u CV-ju disciplinska prijava, blokade, Ruska stranka. *N1 info*, 15 July 2024.
- . 2024. Na blokadi FTN viđen i student prorektor Damjan Vakanjac, snimao studente. *N1 info*, 9 December 2024.
- Nacional.hr. 2025 Zaštita za sina. Zbog srpske veleposlanice u Hrvatskoj Dinko Gruhonjić pisao Plenkoviću, Milanoviću i Grlić Radmanu. *Nacional.hr*, 3 January 2025.
- NIN. 2026. Doktori nauka taoci rektora Madić: Sporne prakse prvog čoveka Univerziteta u Novom Sadu. *NIN*, 18 February 2026.
- Nova.rs. 2024. Nove pretnje Dinku Gruhonjicu na ulazu zgrade u kojoj živi. *Nova.rs*, 21 March 2024.
- Raskrikavanje 2024. Obmanujuće isečen video kao dokaz da jedan Dinko veliča drugog. *Raskrikavanje*, 20 March 2024.
- Reporters Without Borders. 2026. World Press Freedom Index: Serbia (accessed: 3 May 2026).
- Schauer, Frederick. 1978. Fear, risk, and the First Amendment: Unraveling the "chilling effect". *Boston University Law Review* 76(5), 685–732.
- Slobodna Evropa. 2024. U Novom Sadu skup za odbranu autonomije Filozofskog fakulteta i podrške Dinku Gruhonjicu. *Slobodna Evropa*, 29 March 2024.

- VOICE. 2020. Novi Sad – nacionalšovinistička palanka koja slavi genocid? *Voice*, 14 November 2020.
- Vreme .2026. The case of Jelena Kleut: Punishing the disobedient. *Vreme*, 16 January 2026.
- YIHR.rs. 2020. Grafiti mržnje usmereni protiv Gruhonjića: Nasilnici seju strah po Srbiji, država ćutanjem odobrava. *YIHR*, 24 November 2020.
- YouTube. Da sam ja neko - Dinko Gruhonjić (N1 televizija) (accessed: 31 January 2024).
- . Obraćanje rektora Madića ispred Filozofskog fakulteta (accessed: 2 April 2024).