

Human Rights and Democracy Alert

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This issue of the Human Rights and Democracy Bulletin addresses *human rights reporting* in Serbia.

There is widespread agreement that the severity and frequency of human rights violations and the prevalence of impunity in Serbia has diminished significantly over the past decade. However, some right's holders, particularly ethnic-religious minorities, LGBT people, and most recently asylum seekers, continue to be identified as being subject to and at considerable risk of rights violations. The Ombudsperson (Protector of Citizens), Saša Janković, has noted that Serbia is yet to "develop a culture of human rights".

Despite the improved situation, the remaining general and specific concerns about the human rights situation are important for the country. Not only are peoples' fundamental rights at stake, but there are wider, very significant ramifications for the country: membership of international organizations, chief among them the European Union, and the stability and socio-economic benefits membership offers, is contingent, among other things, on a positive appraisal of Serbian state institutions' efforts to protect human rights. Monitoring –research, documentation and reporting– of human rights, therefore, still matters.

A significant number of domestic and international organizations produce reports on the general human rights situation in Serbia and in regard to specific issues – all aiming to illustrate and appraise the situation. These reports, in turn, set the human rights agenda, shaping how the situation in the country is perceived domestically and internationally and, in turn, influencing policy and the allocation of resources within and toward Serbia.

This issue of the Human Rights and Democracy Bulletin considers how the information presented in reports about human rights in Serbia is gathered and how well that information reflects the situation in the country. Here we present evidence that the majority of human rights reports, with a few notable exceptions, over-rely on information sourced from organizations and institutions based in Belgrade, particularly non-governmental organizations and media reporting, and that, overall, there is a evident lack of sourcing of information from elsewhere in the country, bringing into question the veracity of how the human rights situation in the country as a whole is perceived.

HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTS – SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Our analysis is based on a study of 47 reports published between 2008 and 2013 that specifically or in part address the human rights situation in Serbia.

The reports in the sample were authored by 14 separate bodies: (1) the Government of Serbia (1 report, submitted to the Council of Europe), (2) the United Nations (four reports by the UN Human Rights Council's Working Group; two reports by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders – by Hina Jilani in 2008 and Margaret Sekaggya in 2011, respectively; one report by the Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons; and one report by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief), (3) the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe (one report by Thomas Hammarberg, in 2011), (4) the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (two reports), (5) the European Commission for Democracy Through Law (the Venice Commission; two opinions), (6) the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (two reports), (7) Group of States Against Corruption (four reports), (8) Group of Experts on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings (one report), (9) the US State Department (five annual country reports on human rights), (10) Amnesty International (five annual country reports), (11) Human Rights Watch (five annual reports and two special reports), (12) Gay Straight Alliance in Serbia (three annual reports), (13) the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights (three annual reports) and (14) the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia (three annual reports).

Sources of information referenced in the sample range from interviews with rights' holders and dialogue with non-governmental and civil society organizations, intergovernmental organizations and institutions, state and governmental bodies and international organizations, to monitoring of media and other available resources, including other human rights reports.

Reports cite sources differently: some cite sources in a list at the beginning or the end of the report, others provide a list of references or note sources in footnotes, and in some cases the source is mentioned in the text of the report. Sources referenced in the text of the report were the most difficult to identify and could lead to errors in our analysis; 15 reports in our sample reference sources in this way.

We compiled a register of sources of information referenced in the sample of reports. In total 605 sources of information (institutions, organizations, etc.) are referenced in the whole sample. We also recorded the frequency with which each source is referenced in the sample, in a register of references, with each source counted once for each report it is referenced in. For example, the Protector of Citizens is referenced in 25 reports and is therefore counted 25 times in the register of references.

In total the 605 sources are referenced 1615 times in the sample. The number of cited sources of information in the reports range from 9 to 156 – see Figure 1., distribution graph. Over half of the reports (60%) reference between nine and 25 sources of information. 79% of the reports reference between 9 and 45 sources. However, the

10 reports that reference more than 50 sources account for 63% of all references in the sample. In short, in our sample, most reports reference fewer sources, and a few reports reference a very large number of sources, with a notable gap in between.

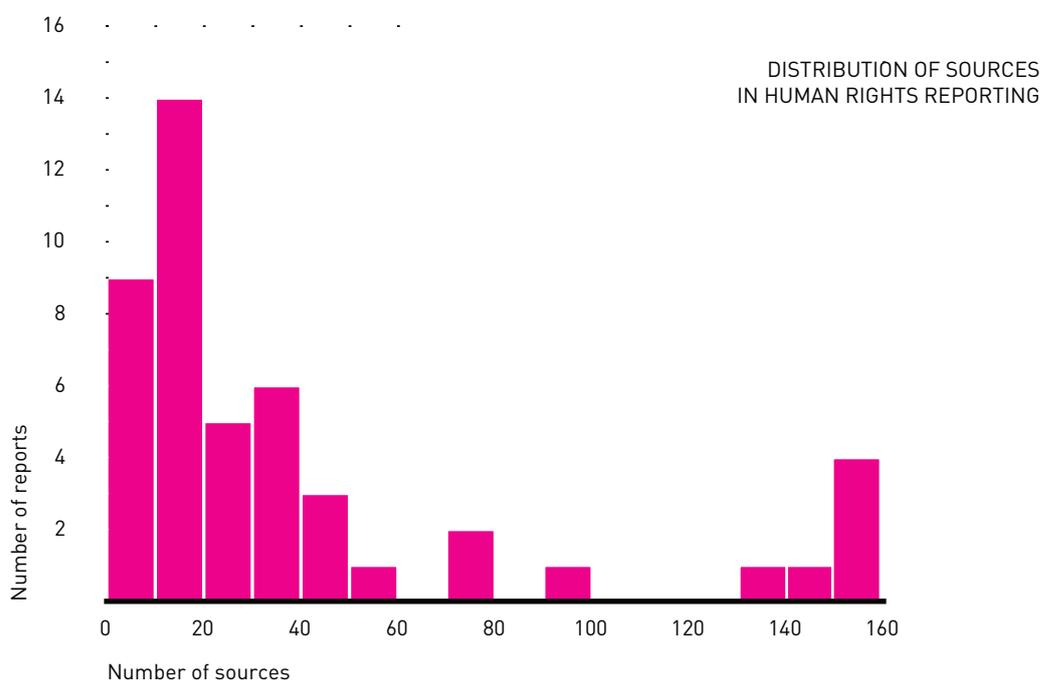


Figure 1. Distribution graph, created for the number of sources in human rights reports in our sample.

The most commonly referenced sources of human rights information are the office of the Protector of Citizens, which is referenced as a source of information in 25 of the 47 reports in the sample; the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and its sub-directorates, referenced in 25 reports; the Special Court in Belgrade and the attached War Crimes Prosecutor’s office, referenced in 21 reports; the OSCE, referenced in 21 reports; and the Ministry of Interior and its sub-directorates, referenced in 20 reports. Of all the sources recorded, 145 sources (25% of the total) are referenced in only one report.

It is notable that the most commonly referenced sources of information about human rights information are all state institutions or, in the case of the OSCE, an intergovernmental organization. Each of these sources is referenced in about half of the reports in sample. Given that 145 sources of information are referenced in only one report, these ‘most common’ sources are, comparatively, extremely prevalent. This however, is not the whole picture.

No single source of information accounts for more than 2% of references and the majority of sources account for significantly less than 1% of all references: for example, in the case of the Protector of Citizens, the 25 references to that institution as a source of information accounts for only 1.54% of all (1615) of the references. Although the institutions noted above are obviously used as sources of information by many authors, they are among a sea of other sources. This would seem to indicate that a healthy balance of sources of information (opinions, statistics, case studies, etc.) are being sought out and used in human rights reports. Again, however, this does not tell the full story.

SECTORAL REPORTING BIAS

When we look at sources of information as sectors¹, such as rights' holders, NGOs/CSOs, media, government institutions, international organizations, etc., as shown in Table 1., and compare the number of references made to sources of information in those sectors, a very different picture emerges.

SECTORAL CONTRIBUTION, TOTAL REGISTER

SECTORS		% of total		MOST CITED WITHIN SECTOR		
1	NGOs/CSOs	SERBIA	23%	28%	Belgrade based	63% of total NGOs
		REGION	1%			
		INTL.	4%			
2	MEDIA	SERBIA	13%	16%	National and/or Belgrade based	61% of total Media
		REGION	2%			
		INTL.	2%			
3	INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, FOREIGN REPRESENTATIVES			10%	UN departments and representatives	40% of total International
4	INDEPENDENT REGULATORY BODIES, GOVERNMENTAL OFFICES AND AGENCIES			10%	Ombudsperson	14% of total Independent bodies and Agencies
5	SERBIAN GOVERNMENT, MINISTERIES AND PRESIDENCY			9%	Ministry of Labor and Social Policies	16% of total Serbian Government
6	COURTS, PRISONS			6%	National and/or Belgrade based	55% of total Courts, Prisons
7	INTERNET PORTALS, BLOGS			5%	e-novine	slightly more mentioned than others in Internet
8	POLICE			3%	Belgrade metropolitan police	28% of total Police
9	RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND CHURCHES			2%	Islamic community in Serbia	slightly more mentioned than others in Churches
10	SOCIAL CARE SERVICES, HOSPITALS, SCHOOLS			2%	various local (outside of big cities)	54% of total Social Care
11	LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND MUNICIPALITIES			2%	Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja	slightly more mentioned than others in Local
12-17	RS PARLIAMENT AND COMMITTEES			1% each	RS Parliament	45% of total Parliament
	NATIONAL MINORITY COUNCILS				Bosniak NMC	slightly more cited
	POLITICAL PARTIES				LDP	slightly more cited
	INTL. GOVERNMENTS AND PRESIDENTS				US Department of State	80% of Intl. Governments
	ACADEMIA				--	--
18-20	MILITARY, PRIVATE COMPANIES, SPORTS			less than 1% each	--	--

Table 1. Sectoral distribution of sources of human rights reporting.

1 A complete list of institutions and organizations and data about the frequency they are referenced in the sample is available at www.bkvfond.org/hrdb_hrdata.

As sectors, by far the most common source of information about human rights are NGOs/CSOs, which account for 28% of all references to sources of information (referenced 445 times in the sample), followed by the media (print, TV, radio), which account for 16% of references. If we add to these references to information sourced from web portals and blogs (5% of total references), we find that 49% of all references in the sample are made to organizations in these sectors, 60% of which are based in Belgrade.

Moreover, to put this in perspective, four of the five most commonly referenced individual sources of information (the Protector of Citizens, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Special Court in Belgrade and War Crimes Prosecutor's office, and Ministry of Interior) are referenced, collectively, as commonly as web portals and blogs as sources of information. This indicates a significant imbalance, in favour of secondary sources, in how information presented in human rights reports is sourced.

BIG CITY REPORTING BIAS

The geographical distribution of sources of information referenced in the sample further demonstrates the imbalance in how information is sourced.



Figure 2. Illustration of the geographical distribution of sources of information referenced in human rights reports. The size of the circles is equivalent to the percentage of the total share of references to sources from the depicted area/town.

Figure 2. shows the geographical distribution of referenced sources of information about human rights in Serbia, depicting the relative contribution (given in percentages of the total) of locations where the human rights information was collected. Figure 2. illustrates that an overwhelming amount of information about human rights in Serbia is collected from institutions and organizations based in Belgrade. Also illustrated, perhaps surprisingly, is the relatively small proportion of sources of information based in the rest of the country. In our sample, 60% of all sources of information about human rights are based in Belgrade. Additionally, we have found that 23% of all the sources of information come from regional or international sources; that is, outside of Serbia.

Adjusting these figures to exclude national institutions (government) and international institutions (UN, OSCE, EC, CoE) based in Belgrade, which, in theory, may gather information through locally based branches, we find that 58% of referenced sources of information about human rights are based in Belgrade or are based regionally/internationally.

Although dwarfed by the overwhelming focus on institutions and organizations in Belgrade as sources of human rights information, a broader focus on big-cities is evident. 4% of all sources of information are based in Novi Sad, 2% in Niš, and 1.5% in Novi Pazar (Serbia's second, third and ninth most populated cities according to the 2011 national census). This observation is confirmed when we look at the situation regionally: 70% of referenced sources of information based in Vojvodina are based in Novi Sad; 75% of the referenced sources of information based in the Sandžak region are based in Novi Pazar.

Moreover, only sources based in Kragujevac (Serbia's 4th largest city), Subotica (5th), Kraljevo (10th), Vranje (15th), Šabac (16th) –all with populations of more than 50,000 people– and Požarevac, Negotin, Prijepolje, Priboj, Bor, Vrnjačka Banja, and Preševo and Bujanovac (taken together) are referenced more than once in the entire sample of reports. Further, local institutions or organizations in the entirety of the rest of Serbia, including Čačak, Smederevo and Leskovac (Serbia's 8th, 11th and 12th largest cities, respectively), are referenced only once or not at all in the past five years.

It is notable that very little information is actually being gathered on the ground, even in areas where human rights concerns are repeatedly highlighted, such as the Sandžak region and the Preševo valley: over the five years covered in our study only 26 references, in 6 reports, are made in total to sources of information actually based in the Sandžak region; only 13 references, in 7 reports, are made in total to sources of information based in the Preševo, Bujanovac or Medveđa municipalities.

There are exceptions to the overall pattern shown in the data. Data from the two most notable exceptions, the Human Rights Watch Hostages of Tension report (2008) and a report by the Serbian Government, submitted to the Council of Europe pursuant to article 25, paragraph 2 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (2008), are shown in Tables 2. and 3. and in Figures 3. and 4. Both of which are special (issue specific rather than annual) reports. The cited sources of information in these reports –both sectorally and geographically– shows a different pattern compared to the overall sample, which is likely the consequence of different information gathering methodologies for these special reports.

SECTORAL CONTRIBUTION, HRW 2008 SPECIAL ISSUE REPORT

SECTORS			% of total
1	NGOs/CSOs, RIGHTS' HOLDERS	SERBIA_BELGRADE	3%
		SERBIA_LOCAL	47%
2	COURTS, PRISONS		32%
3	SERBIAN GOVERNMENT, MINISTERIES AND PRESIDENCY		7%
4	MEDIA	SERBIA_LOCAL	7%
5	SOCIAL CARE SERVICES, HOSPITALS, SCHOOLS		2%
6	POLICE		2%
7-20	OTHER		0%

Table 2. Sectoral distribution of sources in the Human Rights Watch 2008 special issue report.

SECTORAL CONTRIBUTION, STATE 2008 SPECIAL ISSUE REPORT

SECTORS			% of total
1	NGOs/CSOs RIGHTS' HOLDERS,	SERBIA_BELGRADE	9%
		SERBIA_LOCAL	62%
2	NATIONAL MINORITY COUNCILS		16%
3	SERBIAN GOVERNMENT, MINISTERIES AND PRESIDENT		10%
4	INDEPENDENT REGULATORY BODIES, GOVERNMENTAL OFFICES AND AGENCIES		2%
5	RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND CHURCES		1%
6-20	OTHER		0%

Table 3. Sectoral distribution of sources in the Serbian Government 2008 special issue report.

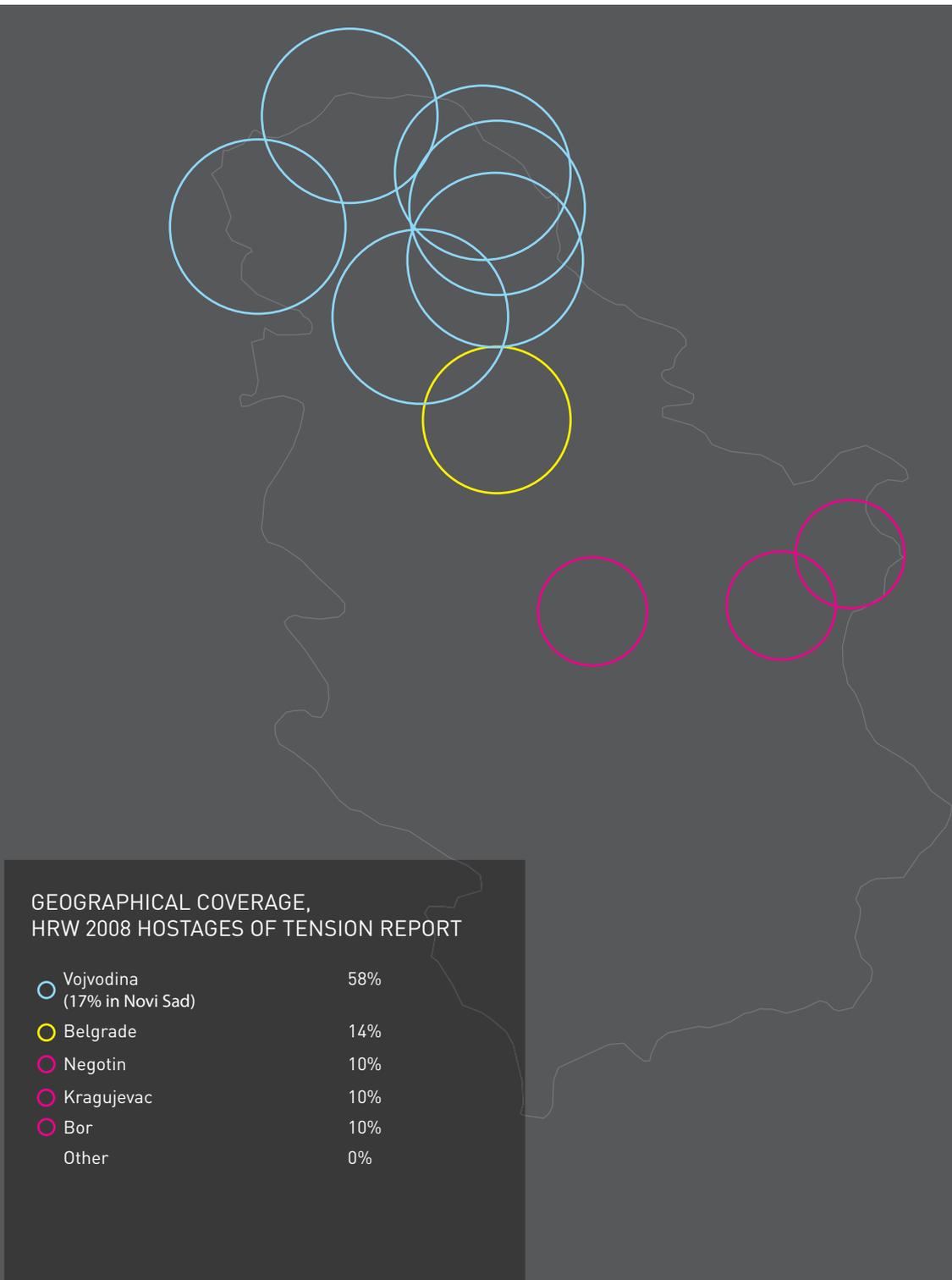


Figure 3. Geographical distribution of sources in the Human Rights Watch 2008 special issue report. The size of the circles is equivalent to the relative percentage of the total share of references to sources from the depicted area/town.

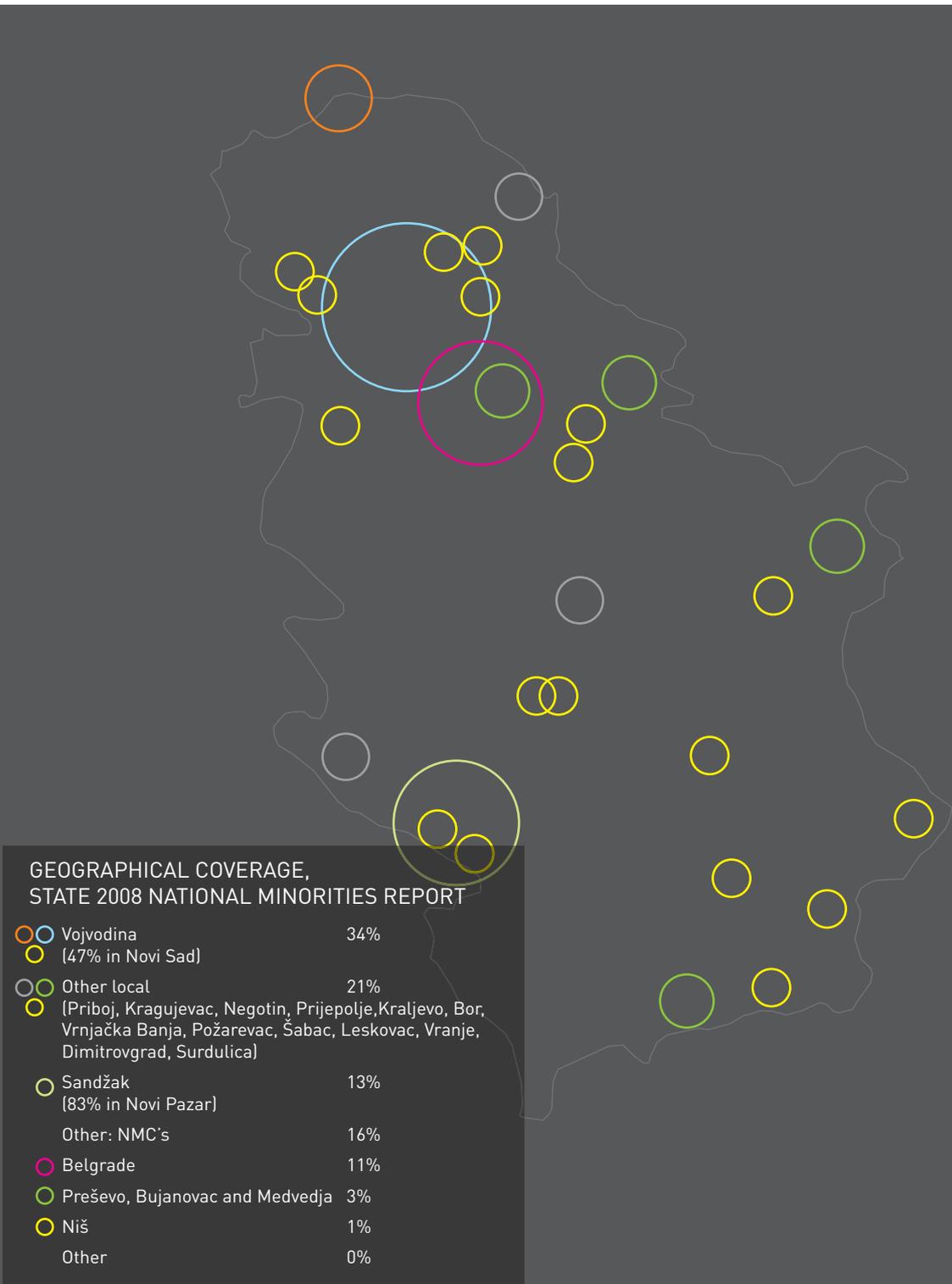


Figure 4. Geographical distribution of sources in the Serbian Government 2008 special issue report.

IN CONCLUSION

The results of our study highlight a bias in human rights reporting toward sources of information, particularly NGOs and media, based in Belgrade.

In our sample, there is a clear disconnection between human rights reporting and the areas and communities they report on. Only 17% of sources of information in Serbia are based outside Belgrade, and only 10% are based outside Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and Novi Pazar.

Additionally, the significant number of sources that we find are only referenced in one report (25%) could indicate that the information gathered from these sources is not being followed up, or, at the very least, follow up is not being reported, which is problematic for the overall monitoring process.

The fact that a large number of organizations based in Belgrade are referenced in many reports year-on-year suggests that a considerable amount of information is probably being recycled (re-re-referenced).

The low number of sources of information about human rights from places outside the big cities referenced in our sample of reports suggests one of two situations: either human rights violations –in the very broadest sense of the term– occur very rarely in many parts of the country and not at all in some areas (the human rights situation in these places is not being reported on, essentially, because there is nothing to report); or, more likely, given the evident geographical imbalance of referenced sources, there are few or no referenced sources of information from many places –the majority of the country–because the situation there is inadequately monitored.

The fact that some areas in Serbia are (geographically) invisible in the overall human rights picture also opens the question of the visibility of specific rights (violations) in human rights reporting.

The results of our study point toward the need for changes in how human rights monitoring is conducted in Serbia in the future.