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PLENARY LECTURE

## COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA ASPECTS OF THE PROMOTION OF PARALYMPICS IN THE FUTURE „SPORTS DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA FOR THE PERIOD FROM 2025 TO 2035“<sup>2</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with the communication and media aspects of the promotion of Paralympic sports in the context of the development of the new „Sports Development Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2025 to 2035“. Paralympics, as an important segment of the life of people with disabilities, is still not sufficiently present in the media in Serbia, and is not well supported systemically. This leads to limited visibility and indicates the need to develop a comprehensive communication strategy.

The goal of the research is to analyze the current position of Paralympics in the strategic documents of the Government of the Republic of Serbia published so far, in the media and society, and to propose communication guidelines within the framework of the development of a new strategy that could contribute to greater affirmation, media visibility and inclusion of athletes with disabilities. Through a qualitative analysis of existing documents, available media sources and information on Paralympism, the research will indicate the current institutional public policies and media practices and propose models of media strategy that can be incorporated into the national legislative framework.

The theoretical directions within which the media coverage of the sports successes of the Paralympians in Serbia moves will also be presented. The research results will contribute to the understanding of the importance of communication in changing the social perception of Paralympians, as well as to the development of a strategy that will be valid in the next ten-year period. Based on the findings, the paper will offer concrete recommendations for institutions, media and organizations, with the aim of improving the media presentation and social integration of the Paralympics in Serbia.

**Keywords:** Paralympics, strategy, media, communication, disability, sport

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## Introduction

The focus of this research is the question of how Paralympics – as an important segment of sport and life of people with disabilities – can be better recognized, visible and integrated into the future strategic framework of sports development at the national level.

For that, it was necessary to consider the existing strategic and action documents available on the official website of the Ministry of Sports of the Republic of Serbia (previous name: Ministry of Youth and Sports)<sup>4</sup>, but also to make a brief insight into the media sports scene of Serbia, which should be a „mirror” of a responsible strategic approach.

Already at the very beginning, a serious obstacle was noticed: although the links to the documents are marked as publicly available, most of the reports on the implementation of previous strategies are not available – the pages are empty or a notification is displayed that the content does not exist, which raises the issue of transparency and continuity in the strategic planning of sports development. Of particular concern is the fact that the last valid Sports Development Strategy covered the period from 2014 to 2018, while the new strategy has yet to be drafted and will cover the period from 2025 to 2035. This means that Serbia has not had a valid strategic document to guide the development of sports for the last seven years. Also, it is noted that the majority of strategic documents covering the period from 2009 to today were posted in the period from June to October 2019, except for the three last documents that were posted in March and September of this year, which further indicates the lack of continuity and systematic approach in the publication and archiving of strategic documents.

The analysis of strategic documents included all content posted until September 11, 2025, which corresponds to the date of the last update of the valid „Work Informant of the Ministry of Sports”. That document served as an additional source of information, given that reports on the implementation of previous strategies were not publicly available. After that date, updates to the Informant were no longer monitored, and neither were new materials posted after September 11 on the website of the Ministry of Sports, including the document published on September 18, 2025.

It is exactly the methodological limitations that were previously discussed that additionally point to a systemic problem in the approach to the publication and availability of strategic documents, which opens up wider questions about transparency and institutional responsibility.

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<sup>4</sup> Article 10 of the Law on Amendments to the Law on Ministries stipulates that on the date of entry into force of this law, the Ministry of Youth and Sports continues its work, in accordance with the scope established by this law as the Ministry of Sports. (Official Gazette of RS, No. 116/2022)

In such an institutional vacuum, it is totally justified to post the following question: on the basis of which information and previous evaluations the professional and academic community can make proposals and suggestions for a new strategic document? Although some additional data were found in the Work Informator, the conclusion remains that the availability of documents on communication channels, such as the website of the Ministry of Sports, is not in accordance with the principles of publicity of work and the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance. This law, in accordance with Article 1, emphasizes that all public authorities should proactively publish and make available information about their work of public importance, in order to realize the public's interest to be fully informed, which includes strategic documents such as those on the development of sports for persons with disabilities. This obligation of proactive publication on the Ministry's website is further supported by Article 39, which requires the creation and publication of Work Information in electronic form through a unified information system, with the listing of strategies, programs, plans and reports, thus ensuring transparency without the need for special requirements. The lack or removal of these documents from the site is a violation of these provisions, limiting access to the professional and academic community and violating the principle of public work from Article 2, additionally supported by Article 4 of this law. (Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance, Article 1, 2, 4 and 39) It is important to note that even the available documents, for the most part, do not contain a more detailed evaluation of the implemented measures, nor a deeper analysis of their results, which further emphasizes the need for greater transparency in planning future strategies.

### **The subject of research**

The subject of this research was the analysis of the strategic regulations of the Ministry of Sports, while the other part of the research project related to the twenty-three-day monitoring of the „sport” section in the main news program of „Dnevnik 2”, the public media service of Serbia – RTS, in the period from September 6 to September 28, 2025.

A quantitative-qualitative analysis of the contents of the documents was carried out, which can be divided into two categories: strategic documents, which are key to shaping the policies and directions of the development of sports in the Republic of Serbia, and auxiliary (operational) documents, which represent supplementary material and enable insight into the practical application of policies.

The strategic documents include: „Strategy for the development of sports in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2009 to 2013”, „Action plan for the implementation of the strategy for the development of sports for the period from 2009 to 2013”, „Strategy for the development of sports in the Republic of Serbia for the period from

2014 to 2018" and the related „Action Plan“, „Strategy for improving the position of persons with disabilities in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2025 to 2030“.

Supporting documents include: Report on the national conference „Local communities in the field of sports – Sports development strategy, Sports Law, financing, violence in sports“, „Manuals, regulations and letters of local self-government units“, available on the website of the Ministry of Sports, which offer an overview of specific activities, measures and recommendations at the local level, „Power Point presentations“ on the planning and implementation of sports development programs in local self-government units and „Informants on the work of the Ministry of Sports“ (for the period from September 30, 2022 to September 11 2025).

„Labor informants“ were consulted as an additional source of data on institutional transparency and availability of information, although they do not belong to the category of strategic or auxiliary documents. Their inclusion obscured the insight into the current activities of the Ministry of Sports and the availability of data on the possible realization of the planned activities on the development of sports provided for in the aforementioned strategic documents.

All documents were analyzed according to key concepts and wording related to the promotion of Paralympic sports, such as „paralympics“, „media“, „promotion“ and „persons with disabilities“, in order to identify goals related to media visibility and inclusive policies.

When analyzing strategic documents, the goal was to determine the frequency of occurrence of topics related to Paralympics, the context and way of presenting Paralympic athletes, the presence of official institutional actors (Ministry of Sport, Paralympic Committee of Serbia), as well as the visibility of the value of inclusion and equality in sport.

During the media analysis, the determination was to monitor the way in which the public media service of Radio-television of Serbia (RTS) reports on the Paralympians within the three-week corpus, using the example of the sports section of „Dnevnik 2“. This choice is based on several reasons.

RTS has a legal and social obligation to objectively and inclusively inform the public, which makes it relevant for the analysis of the way athletes with disabilities are presented. In accordance with the Law on Public Media Services, a public media service such as RTS has clearly defined obligations that ensure inclusive and non-discriminatory public information. In particular, Article 7, paragraph 5 of this law prescribes meeting the needs in informing all parts of society without discrimination, paying special attention to socially sensitive groups such as children, youth and the elderly, minority groups, people with disabilities, socially and health-impaired people. This obligation is

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supplemented by Article 4, which emphasizes the principles of completeness, impartiality and balance of information, and Article 6, according to which RTS must timely and truthfully inform the public about relevant topics. The Program Council (Article 28) is responsible for supervising the implementation of these principles, which ensures that the contents are non-discriminatory, diverse and balanced, including all social groups and individuals. (Law on Public Media Services, Article, 4, 6, 7 and 28)

Despite this legal framework, the current situation in the „sport“ section of „Dnevnik 2“ on RTS indicates a potential deviation from these norms. If this section is designed to cover only professional sports, with the opposite selection omitting the sports of persons with disabilities, this represents a violation of the aforementioned legal provisions, as this limits inclusivity and full information to the public. Regardless of the fact that the sport of people with disabilities is not a professional sport, it deserves equal media attention because of its importance for rehabilitation, social integration and the promotion of equality. The editorial choice to cover exclusively professional sports is not only arbitrary, but may be in conflict with the principles from Article 4 and the obligation from Article 6 of the Law on Public Media Services, because it ignores the importance of Paralympic sports, which further renders the idea of equal access to information meaningless and disenfranchises those segments of society that are already at risk of marginalization.

In this regard, monitoring the presence of sports of persons with disabilities in RTS news broadcasts is not only methodologically justified, but relies on explicit legal norms that regulate the work of the public service.

The monitoring determines that news about the sports of persons with disabilities is not represented or is reduced to a minimum, and this indicates the media failure of RTS to fulfill its social and legal role of promoting diversity and equality.

Media reporting is a significant factor in shaping attitudes towards people with disabilities, so by analyzing the content of the „sport“ section of „Dnevnik 2“ of RTS in this period, it can be seen whether there is news about Paralympians and if the answer is yes, what kind of news is in question, as well as which media narrative prevails. A period of 23 days is sufficient to enable the collection of a representative sample of content for qualitative analysis. In addition, if important sports events take place or important dates are marked during that period, the relevance of the reporting increases and a better insight into the practice of the public service is provided. In the end, this kind of analysis makes it possible to assess whether RTS fulfills its obligation to promote equality, inclusion and affirmation of all social groups.

This research approach is important, because it provides a basis for critically examining the visibility and equal representation of all social groups in media content.

In this part, which refers to the subject of the research, it is important to point out certain methodological limitations. One of them concerns the fact that the content of the entire program „Dnevnik 2” of RTS – was not fully watched. Based on the researcher's previous empirical experience, it can be assumed that the content about disabled people, if it existed, could have been shown in the part of the program that deals with social issues – especially in the context of presenting athletes with disabilities and their inclusion in society by overcoming sociological, physiological and systemic obstacles.

Although it is possible that content about people with disabilities, including athletes, can appear in the social section of the program, it is important to emphasize that such an approach is not inclusive. Even though it is certainly important to shed light on the social challenges that people with disabilities face, it is problematic to put them in the context of social issues, because this implicitly places emphasis on their obstacles and difficulties, and not on their abilities, achievements and contribution to society through sports.

The rubric „society“, in the context of public media, often tends to focus on the problems of marginalized groups and the challenges that these groups experience, which can create the image that people with disabilities are defined solely through their difficulties and obstacles, and not through their successes and potentials. This, unfortunately, can lead to the preservation of stereotypes of people with disabilities as people who depend on social assistance, instead of showing their active role and ability to achieve exceptional sporting achievements. That is why it is important that the media, especially public broadcasters such as RTS, treat athletes with disabilities in the context of their sporting excellence and readiness within the rubric „sport“, and not some other.

This approach would enable a better presentation of sports results as universal values, independent of physical or other obstacles or recommended only for some other, special people.

For the purpose of this analysis, the website of the Paralympic Committee of Serbia was also reviewed with the aim of getting to know the content, structure and frequency of publishing current news about sports and competitions for people with disabilities. The goal was to determine the level of media coverage of Paralympic sports, to analyze the content of the Paralympic Committee's website, as well as to create a basis for further scientific research and the development of communication-strategic guidelines.

Therefore, this double, normative and media coverage of the research subject – enabled a deeper understanding of how institutional politics and everyday media practice shape the public discourse on Paralympic sports.

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The monitoring of media content combined with the analysis of strategic acts provided a basis for insight into how much the proclaimed values of inclusion and equality are really reflected in the public sphere. This laid a solid foundation for further analysis in the continuation of this paper.

## Theoretical framework

When analyzing strategic documents related to the development of Paralympism, it is necessary to rely on normative theoretical approaches related to human rights, social justice, inclusion and the role of the state in shaping equal opportunities for all.

The basic document at the international level important for this topic is the „United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities” (UNCRPD)<sup>5</sup> from 2008, according to which, „persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments that, in interaction with various obstacles, may hinder their full and effective participation in society, on an equal basis with others.” (*Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, 2008: Article 1)

The „General Principles” are particularly important, which emphasize basic values such as respect for dignity, independence, full and effective participation and inclusion in society, non-discrimination, equal opportunities, accessibility, equality between men and women, as well as respect for diversity and acceptance of persons with disabilities as an integral part of human diversity. (Ibid: Article 3)

A handbook – „Understanding The UN Convention On The Rights of Persons With Disabilities” is also available to the public, which provides a detailed guide to key provisions and interpretations of the Convention, intended for policy makers, researchers and practitioners. (Schulze, 2010)

In theoretical considerations, it is important to point out the human rights model of disability, which starts from the understanding that people with disabilities are holders of full rights, and not objects of medical care or charity. This model relies on international legal frameworks, such as the „UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”, which explicitly obliges signatory states to ensure the full participation of persons with disabilities in society, including sports and recreation. (*UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, 2008: Art. 30, Par. 5)

In addition, theoretical approaches to social inclusion and social justice indicate that equal access to resources is not enough – it is necessary to actively remove structural

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<sup>5</sup> The official text of the Convention, together with the General Protocol, is available on the official website of the UN.

barriers that prevent the equal participation of all social groups. (Sen, 1992; Fraser, 2010 and Sandel, 2010)

In the domain of public policies and strategic planning, it is useful to include the approach represented by participatory planning. This means that strategies should be created based on the specific needs of communities (in this case, athletes with disabilities), but also include those communities in the decision-making process, as equal actors.

Critical analyzes of public policies (Bacchi, 2012) can help to recognize how problems are defined in strategic documents: is Paralympic sport presented as a „problem“ to be solved, as a symbol of inspiration or as an equal part of the sports system?

In this context, communication guidelines – if they aspire to be relevant, ethical and effective – must be shaped in accordance with the aforementioned theoretical insights as well.

Furthermore, from the media point of view, it is necessary to consider specific theoretical concepts that deal with identity formation, representation and marginalization of persons with disabilities in the media.

### **Representation theory**

Stuart Hall's representation theory clearly observes that, in the processes of representation, the media often use stereotypes as simple and quickly recognizable images that shape public opinion about certain social groups. This theory explains more deeply why and how marginalized individuals are portrayed through stereotypical and simplistic narratives. The media, Hall argues, often do not reflect the true reality, but construct it through specific codes and meanings that shape social representations and ideologies. Stereotypes are precisely those that are used as cultural codes and can reinforce negative or distorted representations that limit the understanding and acceptance of diversity within society. „Each society or culture strives, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social, cultural and political world. These classifications form the dominant cultural order, which is nevertheless neither unanimous nor uncontested. This question of the 'structure of ruling discourses' is crucial. Different areas of social life appear as entered into discursive domains, hierarchically organized into ruling or desirable meanings.” (Hol, 2017: 15)

Understood in the context of Paralympics, the representation implies a „heroic narrative“ because the disabled athlete is portrayed as an individual who „overcomes obstacles“ or as someone who „inspires society“. Such messages have a positive tone, however, they ignore the complexities of real life and sporting challenges that athletes face. Accordingly, the media are the ones who choose which topics to present and in which way, and this directly affects how society sees people with disabilities. In the

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book „Media and Power”, Hall talks about the fact that it is the media that influence the social inclusion or exclusion of certain groups.

Silva and Howe (Silva, Howe, 2012) provide a critical review of the viability of the „disabled superhero” iconography as appropriate for the representation of Paralympic athletes. Namely, this kind of presentation can be perceived by the capable moral majority as enlightening. However, „superhero” narratives can negatively affect the physical and social development of people with disabilities, because they reinforce what could be called the „achievement syndrome”, that is, that people with disabilities are successful, despite their disability. (Silva, Howe, 2012)

Numerous studies dealing with the topic of presentation of persons with disabilities confirm that the media representation of Paralympic athletes is often not adequate and balanced. Rees, Robinson and Shields analyzed how the media portray elite athletes with disabilities. Six electronic databases – SportsDiscus, CINAHL, PsychInfo, Medline 1996-, Embase and ProQuest – were searched between 2001 and March 2017 to find quantitative or qualitative content analyzes of media coverage of elite athletes with disabilities. The research results show that the representations of disabilities are minimal, and that certain types of disabilities are favored. A narrative of athleticism emerges, but at the same time a medical framework is maintained that distracts from the sporting aspect. Terms like „Supercrip” and „Superhuman” are often used, which can have ramifications for the wider disability community. (Rees, Robinson and Shields, 2019)

### ***Self-presentation theory***

The self-presentation theory of Erving Goffman sheds light on the role of Paralympic athletes in the media in a quite understandable way. This theorist starts from the idea that in everyday social interactions people „perform” – they use verbal and non-verbal cues to shape the way others perceive them. Goffman's perspective provides an insight into how the media do not transmit information neutrally, but selectively shape the audience's perception through selected narratives and symbols. The media choose frames that direct the interpretation of the sports event – Paralympians are often presented as „inspirational heroes” who „overcome obstacles” or as objects of pity, and less often – as equal athletes with tactical knowledge, professional challenges and professional achievements. This type of representation satisfies social norms that favor emotion and inspiration, but at the same time ignores the complexity of the Paralympians' sporting identity. Identity is presented selectively, through a socially desirable and emotionally appealing narrative, thereby (often inadvertently) reproducing stereotypes of disabled people as „eternal fighters” or „victims” rather than as competent and equal actors in the world of sports.

### **Labeling theory**

Labeling theory explains how social labeling and stereotypes shape identities and lead to marginalization. Throughout history, people with disabilities have often been labeled as „different” or „less capable”, and society classifies them as deviant — not because of their behavior, but because of the very existence of their disability. This „deviance” does not refer to breaking the rules, but to the social perception that disability is not a „normal condition”.

Society, due to such „distortions” in practice, should constantly review its own norms, to „regenerate” them so that there is no room for misinterpretations.

These ideas are explicitly developed by Stanley Cohen, in the first systematic study „Folk Devils and Moral Panics” from 1972, which introduced the concept of moral panic. He claims that labeling can even promote the deviance he declaratively wants to eliminate. In fact, it can be said that the tendencies towards social control and norming often stigmatize individuals by dehumanizing them. In this way, stigmatized individuals reach for a deviant identity as a means of defense, which leads to even greater deviance, which increasingly exposes that group to negative reactions and punishments. (Cohen, 2011) Howard Becker too makes the observation that society is the creator of deviance, that is, that the violation of social rules, through stereotyping models, leads to the stigma of deviance. (Becker, 1963)

That is exactly why the standardization of behavior and rules in a diffuse activity — such as sports, should be a carefully planned process, with a transparent and public approach to the subject.

In particular, it should be emphasized that the motivation of athletes is often a strong activating mechanism, which is particularly pronounced in Paralympics and is a good support for resisting labelling.

Ivana Zubić, in her book „Sports Psychology”, lists several crucial motives for engagement in sports, and in the context of this work, the „achievement motive” is particularly significant, which „is reflected in a person's need to achieve significant success in an activity and to excel in relation to other people” and „represents a person's constant attempts to compete with 'standards of excellence' such as success, victory, overcoming existing results (other people's, own, imagined)”. (Zubić, 2023: 97–98)

### **Framing theory**

Framing theory explains the way media shape and present information, influencing the audience to understand certain phenomena, groups or events. Through the selection of language, images and thematic focus, the media create frameworks that determine what is important, how it should be interpreted and which perspective is given priority.

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When it comes to Paralympians, this theory indicates how the way athletes with disabilities are presented in the media affects their social identities, visibility and legitimacy as athletes. In frames that show them exclusively through the prism of disability, pity or heroism, the dimension of their sports competence and competitive spirit is lost, which must be changed through a clearer definition of public policies, but also through the construction of precise media and communication guidelines.

This theory was the starting point for noticing a qualitative difference in coverage of wheelchair basketball teams compared to non-disabled teams in America. After the analysis, it was concluded that Paralympic athletes are often marginalized in the media, where they are denied legitimacy in the media presentation and recognition of their sports qualities. The research included 320 articles (160 each, about both sports) from 7 student online media over five seasons at universities with wheelchair sports programs. The results showed that wheelchair athletes were rarely portrayed as legitimate, talented and physically strong, while non-disabled athletes were portrayed as top athletes and „warriors“ on the field. (Watson, 2019)

### **Agenda theory**

According to the theory of the work distribution in mass communication or the theory of the agenda (Agenda Setting Theory), the media choose which stories about Paralympians to highlight, shaping the public what to see but also how to understand and value people with disabilities.

Agenda (visibility) theory investigates how certain subjects or topics appear in the media, how present and recognizable they are, because visibility in the media plays a major role in how a certain group or topic is viewed and valued in society.

More visibility often means more social recognition. Let us say, if a national television often reports on Paralympic athletes, then the audience will also think that these people are an important part of sports life. Or, if reports from the Paralympic Games regularly appear in prime time slots (for example, on the evening news), it signals that Paralympics is an important segment of general sporting events.

### **International, legislative and strategic framework**

The position of persons with disabilities is legally defined in Serbia by domestic regulations, but also by obligations from international conventions.

The domestic legislative framework, especially the Law on Sports, recognizes this social group and clearly prohibits any direct or covert discrimination in sports, including hate speech. The law emphasizes that playing sports must be humane, free, voluntary, healthy and safe, accessible to all citizens under equal conditions, regardless of age, level of physical abilities or degree of disability (Law on Sports, Article 4).

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Legal regulations provide for the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities, which is guaranteed by: the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, international documents of universal character and documents whose subject is specific rights of persons with disabilities, laws and other regulations that regulate the exercise of rights in all protection systems within the legal system. The Law on Prevention of Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities is of exceptional importance for the legal regulation of the position of persons with disabilities. (*Guide to the rights of persons with disabilities*, 2021: 2)

A special place in the legal framework of Serbia is the European Charter on Sport for All – Persons with Disabilities (Council of Europe Recommendation No. (86)18), as well as the European Sports Charter (Recommendation No. R(92)13, adopted in 1992 and revised in 2001). These two charters represent a normative basis for the development of inclusive sports policies and oblige member states to: ensure accessibility to sports facilities, encourage intersectoral cooperation (sport, health, education), form national bodies for the development of sports for people with disabilities, finance scientific research in this area, encourage the training of teachers and experts for working with children with disabilities. (*European Sports Charter and European Charter on Sport for ALL: Disabled Persons*)

According to the Final Declaration of the European Conference on Sport and Local Authorities (held in Hungary in 1996), local authorities are key in the implementation of inclusive sports policies. Their role also includes providing financial resources for adapting infrastructure, improving cooperation with sports clubs and organizations, integrating people with disabilities into traditional sports structures, including sports in educational and rehabilitation programs. (Đurđević, Mitić, Atanasov and Vujović, 2014: 108 and 119)

Among the important current regulations, we should also mention the „Strategy for improving the position of persons with disabilities for the period from 2025 to 2030“, which was adopted in January of this year. This strategy generally covers the rights and needs of people with disabilities, and mentions sport as an important area for inclusion. The strategy recognizes that the sports facilities are adapted to a significant extent, but at the same time points to the need for additional education of sports coaches in order to make the programs as inclusive and adapted to people with disabilities as possible. The vision of the strategy is aimed at improving the quality of life of people with disabilities through full accessibility and equal access in various areas, including sports and recreation. One of the special goals is the development of inclusive sports and recreational content, which implies not only the adaptation of space and programs, but also the education of coaches. The effect of these measures should be an

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increased number of inclusive trainings in which people with disabilities will be able to participate together with other citizens. (*Official Gazette of RS*, No. 5/2025)

In the context of sports strategies, the Republic of Serbia has so far adopted several important documents. These are: „Sports Development Strategy for the period from 2009 to 2013”, then „Strategy for the period from 2014 to 2018”, while the latest one, which will be valid for the next ten years (for the period from 2025 to 2035) – is being prepared and expected.

Along with accompanying action plans, all these strategic documents represent the foundation on which future sports policy should be built, including the field of Paralympics.

In our country, there is a need for research to review the integrative policy that should correspond to the priorities of sports organizations such as people with disabilities, as well as to give priority in that policy to children and youth with disabilities and disabilities.

However, a comprehensive approach to this issue requires a synergy between the academic, institutional and practical view of sport, which is often lacking in our conditions.

The lack of an integrated approach in the study of sports – which would combine academic seriousness and understanding of real sports events – leads to theoretical isolation on the one hand and media superficiality on the other. Therefore, a synthesis of scientific analysis and practical insight is needed in order to understand and improve the sport more thoroughly. (Penezić, 2020: 388–389)

It is exactly this fragmentation of access that also leads to problems in institutional practice, where the lack of coordination and transparency becomes visible at the most basic level – the availability of public information.

In addition, it should be noted that, if there are links to PDF documents dedicated to the evaluation of sports development on the official website of the Ministry of Sports, those documents are not available, because the links lead to pages from which the files have been removed.

Formally, links exist for documents such as: „Analysis of the implementation of the Sports Development Strategy and Action Plan for the period from 2014 to 2018”, „Report on the implementation of the Sports Development Strategy and Action Plan for 2015”, as well as „Reports for 2016 and 2017”, however, the public is not enabled to view their contents.

This practice of lack of transparency makes it even more difficult to monitor the realization of goals related to Paralympic sports and the systemic inclusion of people with disabilities in sports.

## Methodology

The analysis is based on a clearly defined methodological framework. The transparent and publicly available strategic material of the Ministry of Sports, which refers to the development of sports in the Republic of Serbia from 2008 to today, was selected as a starting point. The research method combined qualitative and quantitative content analysis with comparative analysis of relevant strategic documents and media reports.

In the first phase, the strategic acts available on the website of the Ministry of Sports were analyzed using a quantitative method, searching for the frequency of key terms, such as „paralympics“, „media“, „promotion“ and „persons with disabilities“. After that, a qualitative analysis of the content was carried out, focusing on the contextual meaning and way of using these terms. The documents were analyzed for the presence of terms and wordings related to the promotion of Paralympic sports, institutional support, media visibility and inclusive policies.

The methodological framework applied in this research is based on the theoretical approaches of media representation (representation theory), media framing (framing theory) and labeling theory, as well as self-presentation theory and agenda setting theory which together enable a deeper understanding of how the media shape meanings and value messages in connection with certain social phenomena. Combined with a critical discourse analysis approach, this framework enabled the identification of patterns of institutional and media practice when it comes to the portrayal of Paralympic sport.

The strategic documents were not fully available, so it was not possible to fully assess their actual performance in practice. Namely, without the involvement of the public and transparency, it is difficult to expect that there will be feedback on whether these strategies are working. This „missing factor“ was tried to be replaced by an analysis of the media image of sports for people with disabilities, because the media, in a way, replaces or represents the public and can serve as an indicator of the effect of policies in practice. Therefore, in a situation where institutions do not provide enough information and the public is not involved in evaluating the performance of policies, media analysis can be an alternative way to see if and how these policies work.

According to the above, the sports section of the informational program „Dnevnik 2“ of RTS was analyzed in the period from September 6 to 28, 2025, with an additional analysis of the website of the Paralympic Committee of Serbia.

A methodological limitation could also be that at the time of monitoring there was no major competition of persons with disabilities, and that there was no need to report on it. But the data show that even this is not a correct claim, which will be further detailed in the results and discussion section.

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The analysis of strategic documents was based on data available until September 11, 2025, which corresponds to the date of the last modification of the Work Informator, used as a key source. The new document of the Ministry of Sports from September 18, 2026 – is not included, because the research was then in its final phase. Therefore, there is a methodological limitation that certain insights from that paper are not included.

Finally, it should be mentioned that this research is limited in terms of the limited time for monitoring media content due to work on extensive material of strategic documentation, but it is also conditioned by the availability of data on the website of the Ministry of Sports.

However, despite this, it can be said that it provides a significant contribution to the understanding of the institutional and media treatment of Paralympic sports in Serbia. The results achieved could be systemically integrated into the new „Strategy for the development of sports in Serbia for the period from 2025 to 2035”, which is currently in the preparation phase.

## **Research results and discussion**

In this part of the paper, the findings are presented that result from the analysis of strategic and auxiliary documents related to the development of sports in Serbia, as well as media content, with a focus on where the sport of persons with disabilities is positioned today in institutional frameworks and public/media narratives.

The discussion also includes communication guidelines – as a proposal for improving the future strategy of sports development, which is planned for the period from 2025 to 2035, and for the preparation of which a working group has already been formed at the Ministry of Sports.

### ***Strategic analysis***

The results of this research indicate a significant gap between the legal and strategic framework that formally guarantees the equality of persons with disabilities in the field of sports and the actual sports and media representation of Paralympic sports in Serbia. In this context, the results of the analysis of the documents of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, i.e. the strategic documents adopted by the Ministry of Sports, are presented below, in order to shed light on the institutional perception of this population and the sports activities that belong to them.

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<sup>6</sup> „Recommendation CM/Rec(2021)5 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Revised European Charter on Sport”

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„Strategy for improving the position of persons with disabilities in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2025 to 2030” (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 6/2025), is the latest document in this area for more specific regulation of the rights of persons with disabilities, including the right to sports and recreation in inclusive programs. It is one of the most important documents adopted so far, because it specifies the problem that this population is facing. The document recognizes the problem of cognitive inaccessibility of information, as well as the need for training coaches to work with people with disabilities, so that sports and recreational programs are more inclusive in terms of content and space.

In chapter 5, „Vision and the desired change that will be realized”, the strategy indicates the need to improve the quality of life of children with developmental disabilities and persons with disabilities, their empowerment and the active involvement of all social actors in the implementation of the planned measures. The necessity of ensuring full accessibility, equal access and non-discrimination in various areas – health, education, social and legal protection, housing, culture, sports and recreation, and tourism – is emphasized.

In subchapter 6.2., „Special goals, measures for realization and analysis of effects”, there is a proposal for the development of inclusive sports and recreational contents. The goal is to make sports and recreation accessible to people with disabilities by training professional staff – to train 150 trainers and sports workers by 2030. The expected effect of the measure is greater inclusivity in regular recreation programs and the willingness of trainers to work with disabled people in the same terms and groups. Indicators of the fulfillment of the measure include the number of trained trainers, and the sources of verification are: Annual report on the implementation of the Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy, Reports of the Council for Persons with Disabilities, Report of the Republic Institute for Social Protection and regular annual reports of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality.

Although the strategy explicitly mentions the importance of information on several occasions, there is no use of the word „promotion” in this document, while the word „media” appears three times. The media is mentioned in the context of improving media content and informing people with disabilities. It is emphasized that the development of the competences of media workers will contribute to the reduction of stigmatization and sensationalism in reporting, as well as to the increase of accessibility of information to persons with various types of disabilities. It is expected that better information of persons with disabilities enables their fuller inclusion in the community, facilitates informed decision-making and increases their participation in socio-political life.

In the „Sports Development Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2014 to 2018” (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 1/2015), Paralympism is mentioned explicitly

or in the context of the Paralympic Committee of Serbia only nine times. Emphasis was placed on the institutional role of the Paralympic Committee as an integral part of the sports system, involved in strategy analysis, implementation of the action plan, as well as the need to strengthen the capacity to withdraw funds from EU funds.

The Paralympic Committee of Serbia is formally recognized as part of the sports system, but the terms „paralympism“ and „persons with disabilities“ are not elaborated in terms of its value, social or promotional aspects, but remain exclusively institutionally positioned. „Promotion“ is mentioned in five places in the document, but mostly in the context of promoting healthy lifestyles, school sports and motivating citizens to engage in physical activity.

On the other hand, the term „media“ is mentioned more than ten times, including in the special subchapter 8.7, „Media in sport“ (within chapter 8, „Other objectives“). The media is defined here as an important partner in the promotion of sports, the culture of fair play, the prevention of violence and doping, but also in the popularization of minority sports. In particular, the need to improve cooperation with the media and professionalize sports journalism is highlighted. Activities are clearly defined and include support for media projects, equal distribution of sports content, upgrading of sports broadcasts and improvement of media coverage of sports events. However, in later strategic documents there is no evaluation of the achievement of these goals nor are concrete analyzes of the impact of these activities visible.

„Action plan for the implementation of the sports development strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2014 to 2018“ (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 1/2015), provided for activities aimed at improving the role of the media in sports, which may indirectly relate to media promotion of the Paralympics. It was stated that „activities on equal availability of sports content throughout the country and encouraging the creation of content affirming domestic sports, recreation and positive social value“ will be carried out. The evaluation of the measures would be based on the number of supported projects, the degree of their availability and the impact on the audience. Emphasis is placed on strengthening sports broadcasts on public services, with the measurement of ratings and the participation of relevant institutions such as the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Health and REM. The goals of professional development foresee the mechanisms for the organization of courses and trainings. A special goal is the affirmation of sports values through the media, educational and promotional campaigns, aimed at reducing violence on sports fields, promotion of smaller sports clubs and less represented sports, youth clubs and examples of good practice. The evaluation criteria are: the number of broadcasts and the degree of public interest in the contents of the promotion of positive values in sports, even when they are not of national importance.

However, decisively defined activities of Paralympic sports do not exist in this document. The Paralympic Committee of Serbia is mentioned in the context of strengthening institutional capacities, in parts of applying for funds from EU funds, as well as improving the expertise of sports organizations in the field of project preparation and communication with sponsors and donors.

„Strategy of development of sports for the period from 2009 to 2013“ (Official Gazette of RS, No. 110/2008), envisaged as a goal the improvement of the conditions for the mass participation of people with disabilities in sports activities and the raising of social awareness of the importance and role of their participation in sports. „People with disabilities“ are mentioned 19 times, and the significant context is in the tabular review at the end of the document, where „measures to achieve the goals“ are listed (chapter 8). The goal that is to be achieved is the improvement of the conditions for the mass participation of people with disabilities in sports activities, and as those that should be undertaken, the following are listed: the establishment of an interdepartmental working group (Ministry of Youth and Sports and Ministry of Labor and Social Policy) in order to jointly determine the funding program for athletes with disabilities, i.e. determining the criteria for defining the position of top sports for people with disabilities in relation to the position of other types of sports activities of athletes with disabilities. There is also the implementation of the program for the development of top Paralympic sports and the international competition program through the Paralympic Committee of Serbia, as well as the implementation of the development program for mass recreational sports and top non-Paralympic sports. Then, there are programs for the development of sports branches: Special Olympics, Sports for the deaf and hard of hearing, and Sports for the blind and visually impaired, as well as continuous education of parents, representatives of local self-government units, educational institutions and citizens about the importance of playing sports for people with disabilities.

This strategy offers a broader picture of the problems encountered than all the others after it. He states that the results of Paralympic athletes are the result of personal initiative and efforts of individuals, not systemic support. At the national level, there are several organizations involved in sports for people with disabilities, but their responsibilities are not clearly defined, nor do they cooperate with each other. There are no centralized databases on athletes with disabilities, which makes planning and policy development difficult. Funding in this area is not regulated through a unified system – the associations approach different ministries individually, without mutual coordination, which leads to inefficient spending of funds and possible duplication of funding for these activities. The lack of professional staff, especially classifiers and trainers trained to work with people with disabilities, is an additional problem, as well as inaccessible sports infrastructure and lack of adapted equipment. There is no educational system that deals with the professional training of personnel in this field. The

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health care of athletes with disabilities is carried out in accordance with the general laws on health care, while the institutions involved in sports medicine, such as the Association of Sports Medicine of Serbia and the Anti-Doping Agency, function in accordance with international standards.

In the „Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sport Development Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the Period from 2009 to 2013” (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 80/2009), persons with disabilities are mentioned a total of 29 times, whereby this term appears in several important contextual units. First of all, it should be noted that the improvement of the conditions for the mass participation of people with disabilities in sports activities is part of one of the total of 22 strategic goals defined by the Strategy.

Within the chapter dealing with sports financing, the need to establish an efficient financing system was emphasized, while a possible tax relief mechanism was also announced, especially in the areas of women's sports and sports for people with disabilities. Special sub-chapter 2.10., „Sports of persons with disabilities”, is dedicated to this topic, with the announcement of conducting a detailed analysis of the current situation, identification of athletes and recreationists with disabilities, as well as recognition of associations that could be partners of the Ministry of Youth and Sports in improving this area. Based on the conducted analysis, recommendations for more efficient functioning of those associations should have been developed. Also, the organization of educational activities for coaches and sports experts who would work with people with disabilities was announced, as well as the development of recommendations for the use of sports in order to promote inclusion in schools. Even then, that is, 20 years ago, the need for decentralization of activities to improve the position of persons with disabilities in sports was emphasized, whereby, as a special goal, the improvement of recreational sports in local governments was defined, including the implementation of the "Sports for All" program.

According to the document (subchapter 3.10., „Sports of persons with disabilities”), it is planned that an analysis of the state of sports of persons with disabilities will be conducted in 2010, with the collection of data on the number of athletes and recreationists, which would enable better planning and adjustment of sports activities (this analysis was not found on the website of the Ministry of Youth and Sports).

Seminars and expert meetings were organized, including those in cooperation with international partners. The evaluation of these activities included the number of events and the number of participants. Special emphasis was placed on the promotion of inclusion through sports in educational institutions. Recommendations for using sports as a means of integrating students with disabilities into the school system were

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made. From the available documents, it is possible to conclude that there was an intention to decentralize the development of sports and promote inclusion.

### ***Analysis of supplementary documents***

„Manual for developing sports development programs in the local self-government unit”, mentions the word „media” three times. For the first time in the context of the fight against negative phenomena in sports – doping, violence and excessive commercialization – where the media is designated as a key ally in preserving sports and social values. Another time, the media is mentioned within the tasks of local self-governments, which are encouraged to, in cooperation with the media, promote the true values of sports and bring the importance of physical activity closer to all citizens. (Đurđević, 2015: 17, 31 and 51)

The term „paralympics” is not mentioned in the manual.

The word „promotion” appears a total of five times, of which two contexts are particularly significant: the first is the promotion of physical activity as a means of preserving and improving the health of the population, and the second, the promotion and development of sports for all people with disabilities as an instrument for improving the quality of their lives. (Ibid: 36 and 37)

The words „disabled persons” are mentioned twice in this document. For the first time in the context of the obligation to comply with the Recommendation No. (86)18 – European Charter on Sport for All – Persons with Disabilities and in the context that sports facilities should be adapted to the needs of special groups, such as the very young, adolescents, graduates, lonely elderly people and people with disabilities. (Ibid: 15 and 33)

In the „Manual for financing programs and development of sports in local self-government units”, the word „media” is mentioned for the first time in the context of their role in the fight against abuses in sports such as doping, violence and commercialization, i.e. in the promotion of moral values and preservation of the reputation of sports. In another context, the media are mentioned in the function of reporting and shaping public perception – they describe the profile of hooligans in sports, that is, participants in violent behavior. Their role is informative, but also potentially influential in creating social attitudes about the problem of violence in sports. (Đurđević, Mitić, Atanasov and Vujović, 2014: 13 and 132)

The word „promotion” appears seven times, and the most important are two contexts related to persons with disabilities: „promotion and development of sports for all persons with disabilities is an important means of improving their quality of life and contributes to their rehabilitation and integration in society” and another, where

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promotion is mentioned as one of the key roles of local authorities, which should encourage and affirm sports for persons with disabilities, thus emphasizing their responsibility in creating conditions for the equal participation of all citizens in sport (Ibid: 117 and 119)

It is important to note that the term „paralympics” was not mentioned in the document.

The manual explicitly mentions „persons with disabilities” sixteen times and devotes an entire chapter under the same name to them, in which it systematically emphasizes sport as a means of social inclusion, rehabilitation and personal empowerment of persons with disabilities. The text states that, although legal and strategic frameworks for this area exist, their practical implementation encounters numerous obstacles – infrastructural inaccessibility, insufficient intersectoral coordination and low degree of involvement of this population in sports activities. The manual insists on the need for systemic, intersectoral and locally adapted support, based on international standards and recommendations. The media is additionally mentioned when shaping public perception, both about the problems of sports, and about phenomena such as sports violence and hooliganism. In accordance with the international classification of disabilities, a clear distinction is made between persons with disabilities (physical, sensory and motor disabilities) and persons with special needs (mental disabilities). It was pointed out that sports and recreational activities have multiple values – not only in terms of physical health, but also as tools for rehabilitation, socialization, building self-confidence and a sense of belonging to the community. The worrisome data cited is that in Serbia, out of the estimated 800,000 people with disabilities, less than 0.5% of this population is involved in sports or recreational activities. This indicates an extremely low degree of inclusion and raises the question of the effectiveness of existing public policies in this area. The handbook further points out that, although there is a system of financing sports for people with disabilities at the national level, there is a lack of coordination and consistency between the different levels of government. The need for decentralized and stable support in the work of local self-government units is particularly emphasized, in order to make sports activities for this category of citizens more accessible, better quality and sustainable. (Ibid.)

The Ministry of Youth and Sports published two Power Point presentations on the planning and implementation of sports development programs in local self-government units from the seminars held with their representatives in October and November 2015. The October presentation is more substantial and provides some statistical data on the expected results in the development of sports, while the second presentation is a kind of guide for local self-governments to develop a plan, goals and later their evaluation.

The presentation from October 2015, „Planning and implementation of sports development programs in local self-government units”, does not explicitly discuss the Paralympics, except in the part that states that the general goal of the strategy is to increase the inclusion of the population in sports activities, with a special emphasis on children, youth, women and people with disabilities. It is also emphasized that one of the planned outcomes of the Strategy is an increase in the number of medals won at major competitions, including the Paralympic Games, with an invitation to local self-government units to actively participate. The document emphasizes the need for local self-government units to respect the provisions of the European Charter on Sport for All, which includes persons with disabilities. What is interesting is the fact that this presentation contains rare quantitative indicators, among which is the goal of increasing the participation of people with disabilities by 30 to 50% by 2018 – information that does not appear in other strategic documents. The expected outcomes of the sports development strategy stated in this presentation were an increased number of children and youth who are engaged in organized sports/sports activities by 15 to 20%, an increased number of top sports results at international competitions by 10 to 20%, an increased number of recreationists and mass sports participants, including the elderly, by 50 to 60% by the end of the same year. Four priorities of the sports development strategy (until 2018) are listed here: development of children's and youth sports, including school sports, increasing the scope of citizens' participation in sports by improving sports recreation, top sports and sports infrastructure. The fact that the number of qualified sports experts engaged in organizations in the field of sports is expected to increase by 20% is also interesting.

The presentation from November 2015 „Sports Development Program” contains professional instructions aimed at local governments on how to create a sports development plan and formulate goals. There are explanations of general and specific goals, what to include in measures, activities, indicators, sources of verification. Then there are instructions on how to create a logical matrix, analyze and describe possible risks. The presentation contains information on how to monitor, report and evaluate the implementation of the sports development program.

It can be seen, based on the content of these presentations that the intention was to train people at the level of local self-government in order to professionally and expertly make a plan for the development of sports in their municipalities, but, later, to evaluate the implementation in practice, as well as to make reports. It would be good, in some of the following research, to determine how far this big action of educating officials in local self-governments has come, whether this Sports Development Program in local self-government units has been adopted and what its results are. December 20, 2015 was specified as the deadline for finalizing the Program.

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The document „Letter for local self-government units in connection with the Sports Development Program” does not provide additional information related to the Paralympics, except for mentioning the existence of the Local Self-Government Sports Network within the Standing Conference of Cities and Municipalities, which, although it is not explicitly stated, could also include Paralympic sports through the exchange of knowledge and examples of good practice.

In contrast, the document „Support to local self-government units in the creation and implementation of the strategy – education system” does not mention at all persons with disabilities, Paralympic sports, or the role of the media in promoting inclusion.

In the Report on the held national conference „Local Communities in the Field of Sports – Sports Development Strategy, Law on Sports, Financing, Violence in Sports”, the Paralympic Committee of Serbia is mentioned four times, but exclusively as one of the participants in the consultation, without further analysis of its status or contribution. In the same report, the media is mentioned only twice – the first time as a means of promoting sports on the occasion of the success of top athletes and the second time as part of the goal „media in sports”, without further clarification of that goal.

Due to the lack of transparent reports on the implementation of strategies and action plans, the „Informants on the work of the Ministry of Sports” are also included in the analysis – for the period from September 30, 2022 to September 11, 2025. Although the Informants are available in electronic form from 2022, a partial insight into certain developments in the treatment of sports for persons with disabilities is possible, but also the identification of structural problems that slow down the realization of strategic goals.

Thus, for example, from February 2023, concrete plans for the adaptation of sports infrastructure in accordance with the needs of people with disabilities, such as the announcement of works in Vrnjačka Banja, are recorded in the Informant. (Informant on the work of the Ministry of Sports, February 8, 2023: 51) During the same year, 21 and then 25 project applications were submitted from different local self-government units, but only one project was realized – in Kuršumljija. (Work Informant of the Ministry of Sports, July 31, 2023: 48) This disproportion between the number of applications and realized projects indicates a limited range of support.

Then, in the Informant from 2024, for the same needs, 32 new applications have been recorded, whereby the same municipalities appear several times (Aleksinac, Bela Palanka, Bosilegrad, Kuršumljija, Medveđa), which suggests that projects are re-applied due to disapproval or incomplete implementation in previous cycles. Five projects were approved, but only one – in Kruševac – is directly related to the adaptation of infrastructure to the needs of people with disabilities. The others included broader aspects of sports infrastructure. (Work Informant of the Ministry of Sports, August 31, 2024: 56)

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The trend continues in 2025, when 33 applications are repeated – the most until then. However, the final lists of approved projects remain small compared to the total number of submitted initiatives. There is still no systematic evaluation and transparent monitoring of the results of the implemented activities, which makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of the measures. (Work Informant of the Ministry of Sports, September 11, 2025: 59)

A positive move in 2025 is the inclusion of the Ministry of Sports in the international project „Sports for All: Promoting Inclusion and Combating Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities“, which is jointly implemented by the European Union and the Council of Europe. For the purposes of the project, an analysis of the national legislative and strategic framework was started, which opened up space for a more comprehensive and systemic approach to inclusion in sports. (ibid: 70–71) Also, the first FIDA Chess Olympiad for people with disabilities, hosted by Serbia in 2023, is cited as an example of good practice and an important event in the field of Paralympic sports. (Work Informant of the Ministry of Sports, March 31, 2023: 49)

### **Media analysis**

In the monitoring period, from September 6 to 28, 2025, no news about athletes with disabilities was recorded in any „sport“ section of „Dnevnik 2“ of RTS. Content about football, basketball, tennis and volleyball dominated, due to current international competitions such as the US Open, the European Basketball Championship, the World Volleyball Championship, athletics and football qualifications.

Although the intensity of sporting events can partially explain this editorial selection, the absence of even minimal coverage of Paralympic sports indicates the systemic marginalization of this area.

The reporting model, in which topics from the field of Paralympic sports are most often treated in the part of „Dnevnik 2“ that deals with social issues, as special reports on individuals, and not as regular sports news, favors the passive perception of the audience, which receives emotional, positive information, but remains uninformed about the key structural challenges that Paralympic sports are facing.

Bearing in mind the importance of the media, especially public services, such as RTS, to treat athletes with disabilities in the context of their sporting excellence and achievements, and within the „sport“ column, and not in another column, the fact that, at the time of monitoring, the 12th European Championship of the C division of wheelchair basketball for men was held in Bulgaria, in which the Serbian national team performed, as well as other competitions, such as the international paraathletic competition Pardubice Bez Barrier OPEN 2025, is even more discouraging, as well as New Delhi 2025 World Para Athletic Championships.

The editorial practice of the public service, specifically in the „sport” section of „Dnevnik 2”, shows a clear pattern of preference for professional sports over sports for people with disabilities, which can be considered a form of exclusion. If the argument that only current events from professional sports are shown in sports news as a justification for this selection, it remains unclear why during the period of media monitoring there was no news about international competitions in which athletes with disabilities achieved notable results – at a level that is quite comparable or even surpasses the achievements of athletes from the professional sector.

The news that the Serbian national team member Vladimir Radojicic won the first place in the discus throw – category F51 at the international paraathletic competition, setting a new official European record of 13.28 meters (Serbian Paralympic Committee, September 21, 2025), should have been in the sports news of „Dnevnik 2”, but also the news about how the Serbian national team fared at the European C division wheelchair basketball championship. They won fourth place (Telegraf, September 14, 2025) and were better positioned than the official basketball team of Serbia, which ended the competition by taking 10th place at the European Basketball Championship – Eurobasket (Danas, September 14, 2025).

At the World Para Athletics Championship in New Delhi, Stefan Dimitrijević brought Serbia a bronze (F12) and Nebojša Đurić a silver (F55) medal in the shot put (Paralimpijci, September 28, 2025), and this news did not receive the slightest media attention in the sports section of „Dnevnik 2” of RTS.

If the news on the website of the Paralympic Committee were to be taken into account, it should be noted that the flow of information from the websites of the Paralympians, as well as their communication channels, is very limited. Therefore, if one wants to show the inclusive nature of sports for people with disabilities, journalists and newsrooms should pay more attention to that topic. Despite certain shortcomings, the website of the Paralympic Committee of Serbia contains information about sports competitions that are not „spill over” into other media. And that news could be downloaded, of course, with reference to the source.

In this regard, research shows that, although people with disabilities are occasionally present in certain television formats, information about them is rarely transmitted through multiple media channels. Even when a relevant topic is covered, the news remains limited to one media space and does not spill over into other information systems. (Vitković, 2023: 317–318)

Such fragmentation contributes to maintaining their symbolic and informational exclusion, because the media do not treat them as a complete social topic worthy of wider attention and networked transmission.

A brief look at the media presentation of the Paralympic Committee of Serbia through the official website shows that it is not a classic sports platform with current news about Paralympians. The content of the site is divided into two sections: „news” and „media”. In the „news” section, information about the activities of the Paralympic Federation of Serbia prevails, while in the "media" section, information about the results of the Paralympic athletes is published. There are original news as well as news that have been taken from other media, so the website of the Paralympic Committee of Serbia appears here in the role of a so-called news aggregator. This practice indicates that the website of the Paralympic Committee of Serbia functions as a news collector, without analytical and commentary-based texts. Instead, institutional content is present, while the direct presentation of athletes and their activities is represented to a lesser extent. It is possible that the representatives of the Committee would explain this situation by the lack of journalist staff, but it would be useful to consider improving the site's capacity in that direction. This would partially fill the communication space that currently remains empty, since traditional media do not consistently fulfill the role of informing about Paralympic sports.

From the aforementioned media analysis, it follows that the new Sport Development Strategy of Serbia for the period from 2025 to 2035 should contain concrete recommendations for media coverage that will affirm the professionalism, equality and systemic integration of Paralympic sports in all aspects of public communication.

Therefore, when all the above is taken into account, the preferred media framework is one that emphasizes Paralympic athletes as equal participants in professional sports. Equality also implies parity in information about their activities. Athletes with disabilities are not „special” or some „they,,,” to whom special television programs and shows about successes should be dedicated, but it is necessary that they be shown as „equal among equals,,”. They are just athletes, competing like everyone else at the highest levels of their physical capabilities. Thus, in an analytical sense, media reports on the sports results of those people are expected and nothing more or less than that.

### ***Communication guidelines for creating a strategy***

Bearing in mind the findings from this paper, it is clear that there is a pronounced gap between the strategic goals defined in official documents and their real application, both on the ground and in the media space. The research established that the promotion of sports for persons with disabilities is still treated peripherally – both in normative frameworks and in media reporting.

It has been observed, therefore, that the media rarely and superficially deal with this topic, without a deeper analysis, continuity and affirmative approach, while legal and

strategic acts do not provide enough specific guidelines and institutional mechanisms to improve the visibility and support of Paralympic sports.

For these reasons, the results of this research should contribute to a greater understanding of the importance of communication in changing the social perception of Paralympians, as well as to the development of a strategy that will be valid in the next ten-year period.

Based on the findings, and with the aim of improving the media presentation and social integration of Paralympics in Serbia, the following communication guidelines will refer to: institutions, media and sports organizations.

The aim of the guidelines is to increase the media visibility of Paralympic athletes, Paralympism as a legitimate segment of sport, increase social inclusion and reduce stereotypes, stigma and prejudices related to this social group. There is also an influence on decision-makers to improve system support, the quality of publication of strategic documents, as well as to work with other interested parties to improve the media narrative when reporting on Paralympic athletes. The goal of all participants in this process should be to educate and raise the awareness of the wider community about Paralympism and create a better basis for the coordination and cooperation of sports organizations.

The goal of communication guidelines at the institutional level is to increase publicity and transparency in work. Regularly report on sports development policies, drafting of strategic documents, public discussions. All strategic documents related to the development of sports in Serbia, as well as action and implementation plans, must be available to the wider media and sports community at all times, in electronic form, machine-readable, in PDF or Word files.

Institutions should then work on media campaigns that highlight the abilities, skills and achievements of Paralympic athletes. In these promotional activities, it is necessary to include famous athletes, Paralympians. When developing a communication strategy, field work is also necessary: conducting surveys among target groups in order to assess the change in the social perception of Paralympians and Paralympism. The plan would also include quantitative analysis of social networks (monitoring reactions and engagement to posts) and cooperation with influencers, YouTubers, celebrities and athletes.

Communication guidelines for the media refer to the main recommendation, which is that news about the successes of people with disabilities should be included in regular sports news. It is necessary to ensure a minimum quantitative threshold in reporting on parasport in the public media (RTS, RTV). Then, work should be done to ensure that the commercial media are included in the reporting. There are also the production of special sports shows that deal with this topic, as well as the guest appearances of

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Paralympic athletes in the role of commentators and columnists in those shows. Greater education of journalists and media workers is also needed, as well as the organization of workshops and training for journalists on ethical reporting on Paralympians.

Communication guidelines for sports organizations would imply maximum involvement in cooperation with the media, non-governmental and other organizations to create joint media activities that affirm sports and inclusion. Sports organizations should also have media employees who work on their digital platforms, prepare news, publish interviews, reports about athletes. It is necessary to pay attention to the determination of indicators for measuring the representation of parasports in the media (number of articles, tone of reporting, topic).

When developing all these guidelines, the International Standards of Accessibility should be guided – a set of guidelines and technical recommendations that ensure that digital content is accessible to all users, including people with disabilities. (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines – WCAG 2.2, 2024 and the Serbian Accessibility Association – SAPS, Important regulations related to accessibility, 2025)

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of this topic requires a high dose of social and scientific responsibility, given its sensitive nature. In a society where the existing state and social system does not have a clear and responsible relationship towards all social groups that make it up – achieving that responsibility is very difficult. Over time, such a lack endangers not only those groups but also the system itself, which is slow, non-integrative and non-inclusive and becomes – more of an obstacle than a support for individuals.

Regardless of the good intentions of planners and social strategists, when drafting and implementing strategic documents, it turns out that there are numerous challenges, inconsistencies and shortcomings. Solutions can only be achieved through adequate comprehensive strategic and analytical thinking and action.

Systemic deformations are often the result of bad system solutions, but also of communication errors. Namely, messages are not received or are not interpreted adequately. As a consequence, prejudice, stigma, labelling, ostracism and marginalization of vulnerable groups dominate the public, all of which lead to further social exclusion.

Communication about the rights and needs of people with disabilities should be clear and accessible to a wider audience, with sufficient media visibility and support. It is especially important that institutions, media and sports organizations work to build a media narrative that contributes to an inclusive society, in which people with disa-

bilities have equal chances to express themselves and realize their potential, both in sports and in other areas of life.

How far Serbian society is currently from that goal remains to be seen by future research. This paper represents only the first step – it sheds light on the relationships and circumstances that shape the position of Paralympic sports in Serbia.

Based on the analysis of the available strategic documents dedicated to the development of sports, it can be concluded that Serbia is further from its full realization. People with disabilities who play sports are not sufficiently recognized in systemic and strategic frameworks, while the visibility of Paralympic activities in the public is still limited and fragmented.

The research has shown that the treatment of athletes with disabilities in the current strategies of the Ministry of Sports is reduced to project activities without long-term effect. The biggest problem is the lack of evaluation of implemented measures, insufficient transparency in the publication of strategic documents and criteria for the allocation of funds, as well as the discrepancy between real needs and the number of actually funded initiatives.

The example of repetition of the same municipalities that have been applying for adaptation of sports facilities for people with disabilities for years, further illustrates the dysfunctionality of the existing support system

In order for the inclusion strategy to be effective and fair, a deeper analysis of the community's needs, an increase in the number of approved projects and monitoring of the impact of those projects on the life and development of athletes with disabilities is needed. Also necessary is an appropriate communication strategy, which clearly defines the target group, inclusive messages and evaluation mechanisms.

The proposed communication guidelines imply the elimination of the current practice of difficult access to documents, replacing them with open, accessible and digitally adapted materials. Standardization of accessibility (in accordance with WCAG guidelines) would allow people with disabilities to have equal access to accessible content.

Planning media campaigns and involving Paralympians in promotional activities on health and physical activity would contribute to their social visibility. The media coverage of news public services should include the sports results of persons with disabilities in the sports sections of their primetime news programs, such as – „Dnevnik 2” on RTS.

Education and media coverage of sports topics for people with disabilities are important for raising society's awareness and breaking stereotypes, and proper public information contributes to a greater understanding of their needs.

However, in order for these processes to take place consistently and with a systemic effect, the coordinated responsibility of all relevant actors is necessary – the Ministry of Sports, the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs, the Paralympic Committee of Serbia, sports federations and the media.

The new strategy for the development of sports in Serbia must not remain just a declarative document, but must become an operational tool for systemic change, with clearly defined measures for inclusion, accessibility and equality in sports for all. By changing the media narrative, educating the public and strengthening institutional responsibility, Paralympic sports can leave the symbolic margins and become a visible and equal part of the sports system. Only then can it be talked about a truly inclusive sports policy, based on real needs, equal opportunities and social recognition of athletes with disabilities.

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