

**CHANGES IN THE MEDIA SYSTEM OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA:
A GOOD IDEA BECOMES HISTORY**

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The process of developing the text of the new law on broadcasting activity in the Republic of Macedonia is unfolding slowly. Latest actions in this regard have been taken by the Ministry of Transport and Communications, the relevant government body. This has practically brought the procedure back on track since two years of discussion moderated by the Media Development Center failed to give relevant and quality result.

According to what the public knows, there are several radical changes. The most significant changes regard a proposal on distribution of funds collected from citizens in possession of radio and television sets, or more precisely, who will get the broadcast tax which has the status of a public tax.

According to the proposed version, the list of beneficiaries consists of Macedonian Radio and Television (MRT) with 76 percent (public national service), Public Enterprise of Macedonian Broadcasting with 20 percent (system of transmitters and relays), and Broadcasting Council with four percent (independent regulatory body). Of the previous beneficiaries, municipal radio stations are missing (29 of them which have the status of public services at local level), and funds are also eliminated for development of projects of public interest amounting to ten percent of the total funds. It is precisely this item (public interest projects) that deserves an analytical examination.

Great Expectations

The 1997 Law on Broadcasting Activity introduced the category of projects of public interest (radio and television stations in the broadest sense), prepared by independent producers in line with a competition and procedure carried out by the Broadcasting Council, with the final decision being made by the Government of the Republic of Macedonia. Macedonian Radio and Television was supposed to have exclusive right to broadcast the finished projects to make them available to all listeners and viewers in the country and to allow them to fulfill the function of a public commodity, a logical consequence of the fact that money for them is given by all citizens.

The decision behind this was based on expectations that it would stimulate the creative potentials of small production groups; that it would broaden the issues and concepts in preparing programming products, which until then had been practiced only by MRT; and that it would result in programs costing less than those produced by the public service in light of its bulkiness and slow work caused by low efficiency.

One must say that introduction of public interest projects was greeted with enthusiasm among commercial radio and television stations, as well as truly independent production groups. Experts' opinion was more than positive as well. Everyone saw a good chance for production and broadcast of valuable media projects, of good quality and at low cost.

Devastating Results

Around two million euros, or in the initial years around four million German marks, was collected annually from the percentage set aside for public projects. Broadcasting Council competitions usually gave advantage to projects dealing with children's and youth issues, protection of cultural heritage, as well as feature programs (plays and series).

Commercial radio and television stations exerted tremendous pressure for funds to be allocated for news and entertainment call-in programs as well.

When the results of what these funds produced over the past five or six years are summed up, one can say with certainty that they (results) are poor, very poor,

modest (both in relation to expectations and in relation to the amounts spent for this purpose). Very few, perhaps only ten or so projects, are remembered by people as valuable programming and media achievements.

By the way, money was allocated for programs from the regular programming schedules of radio and television stations (like a rapid water-heater), which by no means deserved to be broadcast on the national public service. Funds were often, in large amounts, given to media outlets and producers close to the ruling political elites. The procedure of application, selection and allocation of funds was full of administrative work, which substantially reduced the amount of funds (expert teams were formed for pre-assessment and evaluation, and then a proposal would be defined by the Broadcasting Council, before the Macedonian Government brought the final decision). Valuable time was lost, projects lost currency, and creators were not stimulated.

Instead of a Solution, Elimination

The above irregularities and flaws are the chief argument why public interest projects were eliminated from the text of the law. This is, so to speak, a classical situation: ways are not sought to overcome irregularities, a new concept is not proposed and discussed; instead a sword is used to cut the problem. Simple, but drastic, bureaucratic.

A feasibility study or legal norms could have been used to answer the question of how to achieve possible, desired and quality goals, to simplify the procedure, to remove abuses.

Public debate on the new legislative proposal is pending. It is more than certain that it will be suggested that public interest projects remain in the law as an item in allocation of funds collected from broadcasting tax. Several owners of commercial radio and television stations, a couple of associations in the media field, and people from the expert and scientific public for the media and media system have all announced this.

The fact is, however, that the authorities, as a rule, do what they want regardless of others' ideas, proposals, efforts. I wish I was not right, of course, but I do not think so.

(I respect a deep message from a song which says “it’s easy to lie to people; how do I lie to myself”).

A very good idea and a productive project on public interest projects is becoming history.

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