

THE MEDIA AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: SLIGHT PROFESSIONAL PROGRESS WITH POLITICAL INFLUENCE STILL PRESENT

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On May 3, media and journalism freedom day, European experts and democratic institutions presented their assessment that freedom of the media in the Republic of Macedonia is insufficient and that its position is at the very bottom of the ladder showing the degree of democratization of the media system in South East Europe.

The Association of Journalists of Macedonia, their largest guild organization, marked media freedom day with the slogan that “someone wants to place the journalists’ pen behind bars,” thus sending a message to bodies of governance (primarily to the Government of RM) that they should do a series of things to enable the media and journalists to carry out their professional commitments calmly and with dignity, instead of fearing what may happen to them while they are doing a good job.

Pretty words, but there is a dark side

It is known that presidential elections in Macedonia, in this election cycle, were held with reduced timeframes because the elections took place earlier due to a tragedy – a plane crash in late February this year when then President of RM Boris Trajkovski was killed. This, naturally, was reflected on the work of the media, although journalists and the media system in general have relevant experience and were rightfully expected to respond to their tasks professionally.

At the same time, adequate conditions were created, as far as normative aspects are concerned, for the operation of the media during presidential elections (the RM Assembly passed regulations on equitable media treatment of candidates; the Broadcasting Council also passed certain guidelines for broadcasters; the system of self-regulation was stimulated and the media itself passed its own rules for covering the election process). These documents, quite understandably, set down European

principles for the media: the way it treats elections, in program terms and in general, should be truthful, fair and with balance.

The elections ended on April 28 when the second round was held with two candidates: Branko Crvenkovski (the country's prime minister at the time) as a nominee of the Social-Democratic Union, and Sasko Kedev, nominated by delegates from the opposition VMRO-DPMNE party.

It was clear already in the first round on April 14 that the biggest problem would be ensuring the census required for the elections to be successful, since the country's Constitution stipulates that elections are valid if the majority of the total number of voters registered in the Single Electoral Roll goes to the polls in the second election round. It is these facts (the evident abstention of the electorate and the constitutional census) that lent the main tone to the election campaign on the eve of the second round, even in the conduct of the media.

The media very successfully presented the election process in all dimensions. With the exception of rare cases, it offered to the public, accurately and elaborately, the legal concept of the presidential elections and the work and decisions of the State Election Commission; it covered the course of proposals and nominations of presidential candidates; it reported with balance on their appearances during the election campaign; it announced results with enviable speed and practically with 100 percent accuracy in relation to what the State Election Commission finally established and announced.

In the first election round there were four candidates: along with the already mentioned Branko Crvenkovski and Sasko Kedev, the other two candidates were Gzim Ostreni and Zudi Dzelili (nominated by ethnic Albanian political parties – DUI and PDP). Generally, all candidates were fairly presented to the public, both with regard to their personal and political engagement, as well as their election platforms. This can be said about all broadcasters, but it is mostly true about the national public broadcasting service, Macedonian Radio-Television. After all, this is something that ensues from its legal and social function. It is of note that the Broadcasting Council stated that this is the first time since multiparty elections have been taking place in the country that this kind of programming work of Macedonian Radio-Television was evident, because in earlier elections it had always been on the side of incumbent governments. This picture, however, must be completed with another statement,

actually from a Broadcasting Council debate, that MRT did this at a time when its ratings and influence in society were very low.

On the eve of voting in the first round, a television duel of all four candidates was held in the national Macedonian Television program, while for the second round this TV duel was broadcast on the frequency of the most watched commercial A1 television, a national concessionaire.

Old Ailments

The media, once again in 2004, repeated its old ailment in that it generally drowned into the course of election activities dictated by the candidates and the political parties backing them. Hence, the public did not get any well developed media analysis on the essence of the candidates' election platforms and the differences between them; the recipients were left without any media offer on the political and democratic education of candidates, and without elaboration on the social consequences resulting from pre-election promises. The example that best illustrates the superficial coverage of events are the television duels of the candidates, when the same questions were endlessly asked (on relations between the Republic of Macedonia and NATO and the European Union, on inter-ethnic relations in the country, on the name dispute with Greece and... that is more or less it). There were no questions, or even comments, on what criteria a candidate would apply if he were to be chosen head of state in proposing judges for the Constitutional Court of the country, for members of the Republic Judicial Council, in the appointment of Director of the Disarmament Agency, in the election of members of the state Council of Security, in the procedure of naming and recalling ambassadors and other diplomatic representatives of the country abroad, which are all constitutional powers of the President of the Republic. Not a single journalist asked in what circumstances a future president would resign, which is, certainly, a constitutional right.

What is interesting for analysis is the conduct of the media on the eve of the second election round when the State Election Commission, ruling political and state structures, international representatives in the Republic of Macedonia and non-government organizations directed most of their efforts into motivating the citizens to go to the polls and thus achieve the constitutional census. The largest part of media outlets, using their respective authentic approaches (information, commentaries, interviews) openly called on the citizens to vote, and this was also present in sections

marked as paid political advertising or commercial advertisements. Only a small number of newspapers and radio and television stations were repeating that voting or abstaining was the voters' right, while an insignificant number called for boycott. Things become clearer if one bears in mind that fulfillment of the constitutional census practically meant the victory of the ruling Social-Democratic Union's candidate Branko Crvenkovski, who had already provided public and open support even from ethnic Albanian voters and the outcome was, so to say, certain if the envisaged scope of the electorate voted. Thus, it was seen once again that the authorities and politicians had not abandoned their traditional inclination to use the media for their own election goals and victories and that the media did not manage (and some journalists did not want) to resist this kind of influence and pressure.

In the end, when one compares the practical conduct of the media system of the Republic of Macedonia with its public commitments (declared in the legal concept, through declared long-term principles, and even through the Association of Journalists), one comes to the conclusion that media employees are in some sort of a controversial state. I think the actual structure is multilayered: some parts of the system are functioning professionally and responsibly, while others – the largest part – are under the influence (and pressure) of politics and politicians (a part of the latter does this willingly, probably for certain interests and benefits).

Along with practical issues, the media system of the Republic of Macedonia lacks established theory in order to elaborate more broadly some circumstances and phenomena such as election blackout and its observance, treatment of paid political advertising – its functions and scope, carrying corrections and replies during the election campaign, and so forth.

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