

## **PUBLIC BROADCASTING SERVICE: POLITICS AS A DESTINY**

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With the act of passing the Law on Media, Law on Broadcasting and Law on the Broadcasting Services Radio and TV Montenegro on September 16, 2002, Montenegrin Assembly delegates from the opposition and ruling parties placed themselves in the annals of Montenegrin journalism, primarily because they facilitated the long awaited media reform and put Montenegro, at least in the area of media legislation, among countries with much greater democratic experience and capacity in this area. This was a big step for the small Mediterranean and Balkan country and it was assessed by international media organizations and numerous foreign consultants and experts as a leading example in the region of how legislative changes ultimately bring about depoliticization of state-owned media outlets, introduce independent regulatory bodies, create free market and much-desired democratization of not only the media space...

It was simply unbelievable how in polarized Montenegrin society, politicians from the government and opposition easily renounced direct influence on the media, especially state-owned media, and unanimously adopted concrete legislative mechanisms ensuring their independence. It seemed as if everyone simply could not wait for Radio Montenegro and TV Montenegro to be transformed into true services for citizens and for politicians to leave editorial influence to the profession and ultimately to the citizens for whom the public service is intended. Thus, the first condition for implementing the media reform and public service strategy was met two years ago with the new legislative frameworks which, in line with highest European standards, protect the media, particularly the public service, from direct political influence. However, when Radio and Television Montenegro (RTCG) managers, with support of the RTCG Council, based on the Law on Broadcasting Services, on June 1, 2003 shut down the Parliamentary TV Channel, thereby ending the obligation of compulsory direct broadcasts of all assembly

sessions, the political stage was thrown into turmoil. It seems that it was only then that politicians realized that although they were in parliament “in the name of the people,” they were not the top TV stars any more since airtime, including the long and tiring assembly series, was reduced to minutes, even seconds, in news programs and parliamentary chronicles on the public service. When politicians from opposition assembly ranks, in the new (re)distribution, got minor roles on Television Montenegro (those from the government succeeded, at least through state and government activities, to remain in the top news programs, although to a lesser degree than before), they realized they no longer had the power to influence the contents of TV programming and thus to determine the programming schedule of the public service. The opposition qualified the shutting down of cameras in the Montenegrin Assembly as undemocratic and expressed its revolt first by demonstratively walking out of the assembly and then by boycotting all parliamentary activities.

The united opposition then boycotted Radio and Television Montenegro, namely public service journalists, although the practice of direct broadcasts of the more important assembly sessions was resumed in the meantime, decided by the editorial teams of these broadcasters. Of course, the boycott lasted almost a year and a half and coincided with the period used by the opposition for non-parliamentary forms of operation. More precisely, until October 20 this year, when delegates from the Socialist People’s Party and Serb People’s Party appeared in a direct TV broadcast from the Assembly, brought about by Mr. Mauricio Masari, OSCE Mission Head. From the united opposition, which has recently fallen apart, only People’s Party delegates remained consistent in the boycott, while the Liberal Union announced its return to parliament. The RTCG Council recommendation to the Montenegrin Radio and Television editorial teams is: “...on one of their channels, to directly broadcast even that part of the assembly sessions which was not encompassed by the Programming Principles and professional standards of the RTCG public services...” Although the TVCG director claims that his enterprise had directly broadcast 92% of the parliament sessions, the recommendation came after several months of Mr. Masari’s diplomatic activity in Montenegro. According to numerous news reports on meetings that the OSCE Mission Head for Serbia and Montenegro held with senior Montenegrin officials and RTCG management bodies, during which guarantees were sought for providing direct TV broadcasts as the first condition for the opposition to return to parliament, mildly qualified as “psychological pressure,” journalists

did not use the opportunity to defend the profession.

Thus, RTCG remained alone and in this unequal showdown it became the loser. Of the numerous local and international media associations, unions, consultants and experts, for a long time no one expressed support for colleagues from Television Montenegro or publicly condemned politicians for trying to interfere in television editorial policy.

Meanwhile, the RTCG Council (composed of representatives of non-governmental organizations, university, syndicate and some other professional guilds) and responsible people at TV CG, after rejecting earlier pressure from the local political scene and attempts to politicize the work of the public service, yielded to the persuasion of an international non-governmental organization which until yesterday, ho and behold, had supported efforts aimed at preventing political power centers from jeopardizing autonomy and independence as one of the most important principles of a public service. But this is not the first time in the implementation of legislation on media reform that one can recognize double standards on the part of international media organizations and their experts, at least when it comes to their attitude towards the public service in Montenegro in terms of financial self-sustainability.

Since transition and media reform is a long process, the engagement of the international community and organizations will continue both for the sake of society and the media, but mostly in an advisory role, since a donor conference to help the public service is nowhere in sight yet, and when it will be, we do not know. RTCG's present situation may help to partly solve the company's funding problem. In line with the popular saying that "even in evil there is something good," the imposed situation may be worth it for the public service, at least in patching up the not-so-small budget holes. In light of the imminent privatization of the Telecom, through which the Broadcasting Agency collects the dwindling RTV subscription fee for the public service, an uncertain future is in stall regarding the inflow of RTCG's largest budget portion. This is why the public service management is right in a way, in the galimatias of confused legislative and media competencies, by again allowing politicians to take over editorial duties and jeopardize programming schedules, in making out a bill for that. They cannot be expected to broadcast the daily political series from the Assembly for free like before, while the state, as a result of transformation from state TV to a public service, shortweights them each

year from its budget which is partly intended for certain radio and television programming obligations.

In any case, once again the biggest losers will be the public service and the citizens for whom it is intended, since usurpation for all-day parliamentary broadcasts will deprive the Montenegrin auditorium to a great degree of the yet well-tuned education program and the improving cultural, art or entertainment program. Thus, after the first stage of restructuring on RTCG's path to a public service, along with initial progress in terms of programming, mostly due to the will of others, but also partly due to its own indulgence, it has taken a step back and has again, in the news and political program, returned to the old positions that violate the fundamental principles of a public service. Independence above all. Filters between political institutions and the public service have given in before politicians' challenges to again establish some sort of information hegemony like in some earlier times. Until all participants in this media vicious circle realize that there can be no public service if there is any influence of political parties, Assembly, Government, or even international organizations. Simply, the public service may be subjected only to the interests of the entire population in Montenegro, namely the citizen.

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