

The Media Landscape of Macedonia in 2004

QUESTIONABLE PLURALISM

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Environment

In 2004, Macedonia faced a very complex political and economic situation. The public was shocked by the tragic death of President Trajkovski. Early presidential elections and a new Government followed, and only five months later, resignation of the prime minister and election of a new Government. Then, an avalanche of dissatisfaction over the Law on Territorial Organization of Local Self-Rule with more than 40 local referendums, followed by a national (unsuccessful) referendum. In political parties, real upheaval. Crisis in the strongest opposition party VMRO-DPMNE, departure of part of its members and creation of two new political parties, emergency convention of the ruling SDSM and election of a new leader. In the economic arena, record fall in economic production, trade deficit, budget surplus, lack of foreign investments and structural reform. Failed reform of education, healthcare and public administration, higher unemployment and poverty, strikes and protests. The only bright spot is Macedonia's application for membership in the European Union and recognition by the United States under its constitutional name.

In the media arena, harsh mutual competition. In broadcasting, allocation of new licenses. The existing 126 private radio and TV stations were joined by three more at national level and 21 at local level. The most watched A1 and Sitel were joined by Kanal 5 and Telma, while Albanian-language TV AISat M just broadcasts experimental programming for the time being. Among the press, the leading dailies "Utrinski Vesnik," "Dnevnik" and "Vest" (owned by the WAZ concern) have competition in "Vreme" and "Vecer" (until a year ago owned by the state conglomerate "Nova Makedonija"). On the other hand, after 60 years of

continuous operation, the first daily newspaper “Nova Makedonija” temporarily stopped coming out, while “Flaka” (in the Albanian language) and “Birlik” (in Turkish) shut down entirely. All these changes caused a transfer of journalists from one media outlet to another. Meanwhile, Macedonian Radio and Television, despite pompously announced transformation, is experiencing the gravest moments of its existence. Internal reorganization of the company and drastic staff cuts did not yield visible results. Local public broadcasting (21 radio stations and 12 TV stations) is in an even worse situation and their only hope is the new Law on Broadcasting. The draft law underwent all expert appraisals long ago, both domestic ones and from the Council of Europe, and is waiting for Government and Parliament procedure. The Law on Freedom of Access to Information shares the same fate.

Media pluralism

If we take as the criterion the number of media outlets, then Macedonia has achieved real media pluralism. Various domestic and foreign newspapers and rich and diverse radio and TV programs are available to citizens and everyone can connect to the internet. The limitations are equal to the limitation of resources, and the most serious obstacle is the low living standard of the population. The figures are impressive: more than 170 public and private radio and TV stations, 54 cable operators who distribute approximately 50 domestic and foreign TV programs, more than 10 daily newspapers, 20 weeklies and over 70 reviews and magazines, of which some only come out occasionally.

However, if we take as the criterion the range of issues covered by the media, then the situation is far from satisfactory. Public media (especially Macedonian Radio and Television) tried to cover as broad a range of issues as possible and to report on events both with fairness and with balance. But, this is not the usual standard; there is frequent improvisation, which is not surprising if one knows that the average age of journalists in this company is 50, that journalists are constantly under the pressure of organizational and programming changes, that they are afraid of losing their jobs, not knowing when they will receive their next salary. As for private media, news programs were part of a planned strategy and they focused almost exclusively on everyday political issues. Politics has a central place; it dictates the media agenda and it is the main business for their survival. That is why everyone is engaged in it, even in debate programs. An obvious example of

this is the schedule of news programs on TV stations: 17.00 (Kanal 5), 17.30 (Skaj Net), 18.00 (Sitel), 18.30 (Telma), 19.00 (A1) and 20.00 (MTV), confirming that the media are *de facto* a player in the media arena and that citizens are sustaining consumers. Economy is far behind, while for other events, especially from local communities, there was very little room, even in the local media, which are obliged by the law to cover them (this is characteristic of outlets that cover the Skopje city area). Because of politics, social issues (problems of ordinary citizens) are almost totally neglected; even if there are any, they are usually part of news programs. Therefore, it is no surprise that the rating of media outlets, especially TV stations, is ranked by their news programs. In addition, the very political situation in the country commanded this.

Even a cursory look at the TV program clearly shows that with the exception of news and entertainment programs, everything else are soap operas and low budget feature movies. Radio stations do not offer anything more either: brief news, lots of music, and only occasionally call-in shows. Everything else, especially educational and documentary program, is an expensive “toy,” a great cost and a risk to media survival. Attempts to produce own quality programming (for instance, the program “Agro biznis” on A1) are rare and usually short-lived (sponsored projects such as “NIE” – a debate program on current social and political issues on Kanal 5). But, what is especially worrisome is that media outlets are enclosed within their own respective ethnic territories, which does not contribute to democratization of society. Distrust is still present when reporting on other ethnic communities, due to which the media practically function divided. Other ethnic communities are covered to the degree that is “necessary” and usually only when a media outlet that broadcasts programming in the language of that community has already informed the public about it.

Profitability of business and the ownership structure

All media outlets had the same problem: how to maintain profitability of their activities in conditions of the grave economic situation in the country. The market is very small and burdened with a large number of media. Everyone “fought” for the marketing pie, and those close to certain political and business groups won. Inflow of additional, foreign donations decreased; the state entirely discontinued the practice of subsidizing the media (press primarily); a big part of citizens did not pay broadcasting tax. Accusations coming

from private broadcasters regarding unfair competition posed by MRTV and its dumping advertising prices did not calm down either. Everyone is affected, especially small local radio and television stations, media covering certain fields and target groups, as well as those who are not on the same “line” with the political strongmen. They were particularly affected by the withdrawal of foreign non-governmental organizations, from which they had up until then received most of their financial resources. The first to feel this were “Koha Ditore” and “Lobi,” Albanian-language newspapers, which stopped coming out in January 2005 (leaving the Albanian community in Macedonia with just one paper, Fakti), and which had been critical of members of the Albanian community in the authorities and in party leaderships. The Helsinki Committee reacted, calling on the authorities, in particular the international community, to “continue to support independent media as part of development of democracy in Macedonia.” Are next on the list TV BTR and TV Sutel, local stations broadcasting in the Romany language, which are also helped by foreign donors?

Treatment of media not as a business, but rather as a tool for exercising political, economic or other interest results, among other things, in total closure of the ownership structure; legal obligations regarding restrictions on concentration of capital are not obeyed either. What dominates in practice are several business conglomerates among the print media, which directly threatens freedom of speech, and dominance of large business subjects among TV stations. Daily newspaper monopoly is being mentioned more and more often. Utrinski Vesnik, Dnevnik and Vest are under the “umbrella” of the German concern WAZ. True, in early 2004 the Monopoly Administration released data according to which its participation in the market is only 54.9% (the remaining part belongs to the newspapers Vreme and Vecer) and assessed this as “proof that there is healthy competition, rather than monopoly on the print media market.” In contrast, under the Law against Restriction of Competition, two or three companies have a dominant position if their joint participation on the market is 50% or more. The merger of these three publishers took place in mid-2003. No comment needed! On the other hand, the large oil company “Makpetrol” dominates at TV Telma, while the mining conglomerate “Sileks” dominates at TV Sitel. Both stations broadcast at national level. What is partly encouraging is a readiness, expressed primarily by the print media (especially Utrinski Vesnik, Dnevnik and Vest), to release very soon data on their ownership structure, who has capital in these newspapers, how big is the capital, whether large corporations stand behind it or not. This may serve as a positive example to other subjects in the media sphere.

Editorial policy and journalistic professionalism

Approach to the media market is open and free and no one has special privileges. Journalists have free access to events and access to the journalistic profession is free. But, there is no law guaranteeing independent editorial policy. There are no collective contracts between journalist associations and media owners, and media employees are not organized in syndicates. It is hard to speak of independence when a large number of media owners (or their family members) are politically active and when many media outlets are actually just a part of large business conglomerates. Macedonian Radio and Television was not helped by radical structural changes occurring in 2004; as long as the company's management is named by the ruling political structure, this directly affects its management and programming profile. As for the collective contract, it was passed at MRTV in 2003.

The professional and scholarly public has been pointing out for quite a while the big influence of politics and business elites on creation of media editorial policy. What even happened is that so-called "political balance" was established – the ruling structure exercises its influence through the public service, both at national and local level, and the opposition does this through commercial media. Thus, the media are constantly in the spotlight of the political struggle between the authorities and opposition. This is a source of journalistic non-professionalism, subjectivism and submissiveness to pressure or self-censorship in order to keep one's job. This situation is favored by lack of ownership transparency of private media on one hand, and direct political influence on the public service management structure on the other.

The result is visible. News is not neutral. Events are commented upon regularly, especially on national TV stations. There is no clear distinction between fact and comment, precise sources of information are rarer and rarer, while views of the opposing side are incidental. Those who dare resist the editorial "dictate" of the media owner or director in the best case scenario can go to another media outlet, while the majority are left jobless. An example of this is a clash between the editor-in-chief and the owner of A1 concerning the manner of reporting in news programs, which resulted in the editor moving to another TV company. It is devastating, but true, that this is not talked about publicly or within journalist associations. Journalist self-censorship is increasingly present. It is an open secret that it

functions very well at MRTV, supposedly as a result of old habits, old staff, but undoubtedly also because of pressure exerted by the authorities expressed through the management staff. In private media, even young journalists are liable to self-censorship. There is no reaction from the profession, from journalist associations, to the pressure, abuse, even censorship among the media and journalists. The explanation, or “justification,” given for the silence is the uncertain social and economic position of journalists: low and irregular salaries, evasion on the part of media owners to pay social security costs and other employee benefits.

What next

What changes can the media expect in the coming period? It is more than certain that the imminent passing on the Law on Freedom of Access to Information (which finally entered parliamentary procedure) is significant not just for citizens; it is significant for the media as well. Pressure is also mounting for a new Law on Broadcasting to be passed. This is indicated by the latest public discussion, held on January 26, 2005, organized specifically with the aim of reminding the authorities of the necessity of passing the law. Expectations are great because the law stipulates some very significant changes in the broadcasting sphere: independence of the Broadcasting Council, development strategy for broadcasting, essential changes in the editorial structure of the public service (especially selection of director general and steering board), and thereby also changes in programming and editorial policy and transformation of public local broadcasters into private or non-profit media centers. In the private broadcasting sector, stricter programming quality criteria, application of a programming quota system, complete opening of ownership structure, as well as a possibility of horizontal linkage with print media. And what is very important, it is essential to ensure the autonomy, independence and responsibility of broadcast organizations, editors, journalists and other subjects involved in production of program and creation of editorial policy. OPTIMISTIC! But, we should wait for the law to be passed and implemented in practice.

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