

THE EDITORS' ROLE IN MEDIA INTEGRITY PROTECTION IN SERBIA

CLOSER TO OWNERS THAN TO JOURNALISTS

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INTRODUCTION

Serbian journalism has been caught in a process of economic and professional deterioration for so long that the poor economic status of journalists is no longer considered to be of crucial importance for the explanation of its peculiarities. The chaotic development of the media industry in an unregulated market, with the state as a powerful, arbitrary and non-transparent source of funding, coupled with the dominance of commercial motives on the part of new media owners has turned the media into a means of promotion, propaganda, blackmail and public lynching, instead of a source of information, a place of social dialogue and a means of scrutiny of the government.

Recent changes in the media scene, prompted by three new media laws adopted in 2014, have fallen far below expectations. They had no effect on the dysfunctional media market and left intact the mechanisms of soft censorship, which enable instrumentalisation of the media for the particular agendas of the funding sources (Hrvatín and Petković 2016).

The numerous, steady negative developments in the media field have stimulated discussion on the need for a re-professionalisation of journalism. This paper deals with the issue of the role of editors-in-chief in the effort towards a re-affirmation of ethical journalism in the public interest. Are editors-in-chief important today? Could they be considered an important resource in the struggle for the protection of media integrity, in the context of economic crisis, the media's increasing dependence on state funds, the lack of a culture of public accountability and the persistence of journalistic grievances which signal that working conditions have never been worse?

In the socialist era, it was very important who the editors-in-chief of the media were. For those who appointed them, editors-in-chief were the guarantee that the published content would remain in the domain of official ideology. For the journalistic community, they were a measure of the flexibility of the authorities towards aspirations for liberalisation of the social system. For the audience, they were signposts of freedom of speech. Dismissals of editors were highly important political, social and cultural events.

In the period of disintegration of socialism and the building of the Serbian nation-state, editors-in-chief once again became important. The first act of Slobodan Milošević, after his group had won predominance in the structure of the party, was to change the leading people in the most important Serbian media and thus to secure media support for the new party state and its war policy. All twists in this policy were followed by appointments of new chief editors. State-owned media were one of the strategic pillars of the Milošević regime; their strong propaganda functioning was secured by the actions of editors loyal to the regime. In contrast to the regime's media and editors, outside the state control, new media were created as islands of sanity in a nationalistic frenzy, largely thanks to the personal engagement of chief editors, such as Staša Marinković (daily *Borba*), Dragoljub Žarković (weekly *Vreme*), Veran Matić (*Radio B92*). The two opposing media camps grew in parallel with one another, while the appointments of editors-in-chief were of importance for the future of the media within these camps.

Today, after 15 years of media reform, appointments and dismissals of chief editors do not attract much attention, either within the media community or in the wider public. This absence of turbulence, however, is not the result of fine regulation of the media system, with effective guarantees of media autonomy and established procedures for resolving conflicts between professional and organisational goals. The silence over appointments and dismissals of chief editors is the result of the crisis in journalism as a profession and the collapse of the media industry, which has by now been operating in survival mode for seven or eight years.

With a low level of expectations from media, the audience no longer reacts to the fact that the loudest and best known editor-in-chief is a symbol for all that is wrong in journalism: the owner of the tabloid *Informer*, Dragan Vučićević. Journalists, who are caught somewhere between their weariness of transitional change and the still surviving professional myths and legends, do not wonder why a satirical columnist has recently replaced a serious analyst in the position of editor-in-chief of the high-quality and consistently civic oriented daily *Danas*. No one cares why Veran Matić is still editor-in-chief of *RTV B92*, although he presided over the atrophy of all the important journalistic achievements of *B92*, achievements which had once made it world famous.

Still, the 12 media editors and experts interviewed for the purpose of this study responded positively to the question of whether it matters who is taking editor-in-chief position in the media.

Interviewed in March 2016, our respondents included three current editors-in-chief, one deputy editor-in-chief and one former editor-in-chief, in addition to editors from diverse national and regional media.

ARE EDITORS-IN-CHIEF IMPORTANT TODAY? COULD THEY BE CONSIDERED AN IMPORTANT RESOURCE IN THE STRUGGLE FOR THE PROTECTION OF MEDIA INTEGRITY. TODAY, AFTER 15 YEARS OF MEDIA REFORM, APPOINTMENTS AND DISMISSALS OF CHIEF EDITORS DO NOT ATTRACT MUCH ATTENTION, EITHER WITHIN THE MEDIA COMMUNITY OR IN THE WIDER PUBLIC.

The latest research concerning the situation of journalists in Serbia, published in the study *From Journalists to Wage Earners. Precarious Work and Life* (Mihailović 2015), confirms that crisis has become a chronic state in the profession. A majority of journalists believe that the unfavourable economic position of journalists will continue to be the main characteristic of the profession in the near future and that it is the key factor that prevents efficient resistance to the instrumentalisation of the media.

The study is based on a 2015 survey involving 1,100 media workers (740 employed and 370 unemployed). About three quarters of them (77 percent) believe that the state controls the media, 62 percent think that there is no freedom of the media in Serbia, 73 percent believe that self-censorship among journalists is widespread, while 76 percent think that there is more self-censorship than censorship, since journalists are afraid of losing their jobs.

This study shows that the professional culture of journalists changed drastically during the economic crisis. A large number of journalists left the profession. Those who remained, like a frog slowly being boiled alive, became used to the increasing commercialisation and tabloidisation of journalism, as well as to the drastic departures from professional rules and ethics required from them in order to receive their salaries. As one of the respondents in the survey put it, there was no need for threats *“because the threat already exists, it is there, it is constant – in a poorly paid and highly precarious job.”*

Having examined the conditions of journalistic work in detail, the authors of the study concluded that the journalistic profession has been affected by the process of precarisation, i.e. the process of rendering work and life insecure. Nothing is safe and long lasting, especially not the place of work and employment. The study found that for 61 percent of media workers there has been a significant precarisation of work and life, particularly in terms of labour rights, working hours, job security and the conditions of work.

The most important finding of this research concerns a division within the journalistic ranks in terms of preferences for their professional future. For example, 41 percent of respondents would be most in favour of leaving journalism to work in another field, 37 percent would opt for any media outlet where they could work freely, regardless of status and salary level, while 22 percent of respondents would choose a safe job contract even at the cost of not always reporting on what they know or think.

According to the above data, one in five journalists is no longer committed to socially responsible journalism. They accept that a condition of their survival in the profession is doing what their superiors say, regardless of the professional code of conduct. Two out of five are burned out and could turn either way, meaning that they could still be influenced in the direction of

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re-professionalisation. The profession still can count firmly on the remaining two out of five. These are the ones who preserve professional identity and media integrity, even at high cost to themselves.

2 UNKNOWN PROFILE OF EDITORS

There are no indications of how this research finding – that for every five journalists, two are combative, two lethargic and one “lost” (corrupt) – applies to the ranks of media chief editors. The number of chief editors has long surpassed a thousand, but no one tracks or analyses them. Many of the media outlets and their editors are actually very little known outside their local communities.

Interestingly enough, chief editors are rarely found on the lists of the most powerful people in the media sector, such as the lists published by the daily newspaper *Blic* for years. On the lists from 2011, 2014 and 2015,¹ among the 50 most powerful persons, there were 13 chief editors on two occasions, while in one of these years 12 editors-in-chief were on the list, though not the same names were on the list in the observed period. The lists of the privileged ones usually included chief editors of national dailies (Ringier’s editions *Blic* and *Alo*, two serious newspapers *Politika* and *Danas*, the semi tabloid *Novosti*, the tabloids *Kurir*, *Pres*, and *Informer*) and the weekly magazines (*NIN*, *Vreme*, *Nedeljnik*, *Novi magazin*, *Blic žena*), but only rarely radio and TV media (*B92*, *Studio B*, *TV Avala*, *Radio Beograd*). According to the authors of the list, when choosing the most powerful, the criteria involved how difficult it was for them to achieve their goals, public recognition, financial and political influence, personal authority and the reputation of the institution they represent and personal charisma.²

It turned out that more powerful than the chief editors are the media owners, owners of advertising agencies, production house owners, people from the ministry in charge of media and directors of electronic media (except in the case when the functions of director and chief editor coincided, or where the head of a given media outlet was an editor with a particular journalistic reputation).

In the opinion of the 12 media editors and experts interviewed for our study, today’s chief editors are highly diverse. There is no prevailing profile or general career path in journalism that leads to the position of editor-in-chief.

1 See e.g. <http://www.nuns.rs/info/news/23181/50-najmocnijih-u-medijima-u-srbiji.html>. Accessed 2 April 2016.

2 See <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/pedeset-najmocnijih-u-medijima/tvg679b>. Accessed 2 April 2016.

ONE IN FIVE JOURNALISTS IS NO LONGER COMMITTED TO SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM. TWO OUT OF FIVE ARE BURNED OUT AND COULD TURN EITHER WAY. THE PROFESSION STILL CAN COUNT FIRMLY ON THE REMAINING TWO OUT OF FIVE. THESE ARE THE ONES WHO PRESERVE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND MEDIA INTEGRITY, EVEN AT HIGH COST TO THEMSELVES.

Some outlines of the chief editors' profile are offered by a survey conducted among the editors of media outlets across Serbia in 2011.³ A typical editor-in-chief is a male between 40 and 50 years of age, who has been working in journalism for more than 20 years, and with university degree in the field of social sciences. Among the 167 surveyed editors from all types of media, 71 percent were men, and only 29 percent women. Older journalists with lengthy professional careers prevailed in comparison to those who were middle-aged and in the middle of their careers. About three-quarters of these editors (76 percent) were older than 40, and one in three over 50 years of age. Editors below 30 years of age were better represented in local media, but their number was still considerably low. For example, 4 percent of editors in local media were younger than 30, compared to 7 percent of editors over 60 years of age. Overall, the largest number of editors (30 percent) had between 20 and 30 years of professional experience, while 21 percent had between 15 and 20 years of experience, and 20 percent of editors had up to 15 years of experience.

More than half (55 percent) had university education, and in most cases they hold degrees in social sciences although there were also those who graduated from technical universities (4 percent). Among the remaining participants, there were more with secondary education (22 percent) than with post-secondary qualifications (19 percent). The number possessing specialised education in journalism was relatively low: less than a fifth (17 percent) had completed a faculty specialising in journalism, while about a quarter (24 percent) had acquired specialised knowledge by attending journalism courses or training sessions following secondary or higher general education.

As someone who, during decades of involvement in the education of journalists, has met the chief editors of a variety of media in Serbia, Mitko Jakovlevski says that he cannot normally recognise a pattern or any criteria by which these persons became editors-in-chief.⁴ In his view, a dominant practice of today is that anyone can be the chief editor, irrespective of education and professional quality. Jakovlevski locates the process of decline in the quality of media workers in the period of the 1990s. Before that, at the end of the 1980s, "red" media outlets such as *Borba* and *Radio Belgrade* gave rise to a cadre of excellent professionals, who, as chief editors, subsequently contributed to the development of professional journalism and resisted the war-mongering propaganda. Jakovlevski believes that the role of editor-in-chief began to lose its importance in the era of the economic rise of the media in the period between 2005 and 2008, when the media owners began to have the dominant influence

3 The survey was conducted by four journalistic and professional associations (NUNS, ANEM, NDNV and Local Press) for the publication *Serbian Media Scene VS European Standards* on a sample of 240 executives in the media, of which 167 were editors-in-chief or their deputies and assistants (others were the owners, directors or other editors).

4 Interview with Mitko Jakovlevski, former editor and specialist in media education, Belgrade, 19 March 2016.

TODAY'S CHIEF EDITORS ARE HIGHLY DIVERSE. THERE IS NO PREVAILING PROFILE OR GENERAL CAREER PATH IN JOURNALISM THAT LEADS TO THE POSITION OF EDITOR-IN-CHIEF.

on the media, and the “chief editor was only the executer of the owner’s desires, that is, he determined the framework of the work of journalists in accordance to the needs or the financial arrangements made by the owner.” In addition, many media have become the prey of parties in power – according to Jakovlevski, these are not just public companies or public service broadcasters, but also private media – thus making the chief editor’s position into one that can be used for the promotion of political and related economic power centres.

3 MODELS AND EXAMPLES OF AN EDITORIAL CAREER

In previous decades, the path to the position of editor-in-chief was schematic and lengthy. Editors were cultivated in their newsrooms, by gradual preparation for more complex tasks. Today this is the exception rather than the rule. The chaotic development of the media over the last two decades has led to the creation of a multitude of newsrooms with a small number of people, and to the disappearance of the practice of gradual internal education for a job placement. According to Jelka Jovanović, editor of the *Novi magazin* weekly and former vice president of the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia (NUNS),⁵ “the former gradual rise to the top, starting from covering the green market to covering the National Assembly, and from writing commentaries to editing the section,” has disappeared. Editorial careers are being determined by other factors and affiliations.

When speaking about editors in the media in which they once worked or where they currently work, the 12 editors interviewed for this report claim that the majority of editors were chosen based on their professional experience, ethics, reputation and personal leadership skills. Still, for other media, they say that different criteria prevail for the appointment of editors.

The tabloid press established the model for the advancement of individuals based on their having good connections with the establishment, including the secret service or other security structures and confidential ties with the owners, who often remain hidden. Based on these relations, individuals record a meteoric rise, and then they move from one tabloid to another. This model is transferred to other media as favouritism of individuals who easily make compromises with the management. These editors-in-chief are not looking for good authors with experience and knowledge among their subordinates, but for “cheap but fast, disciplined and ambitious” runners (Mihailović 2015, 92).

In the remnants of the state-owned media – the daily newspapers (*Politika*, *Novosti*, and *Dnevnik*), public service broadcasters and the minority media

5 Interview with Jelka Jovanović, editor, *Novi magazin* weekly, Belgrade, 19 March 2016. .

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founded by the councils of national minorities – editors-in-chief are still chosen on a political basis.

A paradigmatic example of appointment priorities in the public media sector is the case of the director and chief editor of *RTV Studio B*, Aleksandar Timofejev.

He was appointed to this position in 2007 by the Belgrade City Assembly, the founder of *Studio B*, which was at the time dominated by the Democratic Party. Timofejev was a strong and highly active opponent of privatisation of the media during the preparation of the law that envisaged mandatory privatisation. He promoted *Studio B* as a public service broadcaster, hiding its nature as a state-owned media outlet, financed from the budget and actually governed by the local authority – Belgrade City Assembly. He believed that he had managed to make *TV Studio B* a “good city television which has nothing to do with politics”. In reality, politics indeed was not the primary topic in the programming of *TV Studio B*. However, according to content research, the absence of political topics proved commensurate with the sophisticated promotion of the views of the city authorities on all the issues and a corresponding absence of any critique of its work (Matić 2014). Timofejev feared that privatisation would destroy *Studio B* because a private owner would have no interest in continuing to produce programming in the public interest. More than a year before the new owner of *Studio B* had the chance to realise Timofejev’s fears, this was done by the local authority, now under the control of new political forces, which won the elections in March 2014. The new composition of the Belgrade City Assembly fired Timofejev in May 2014, with the explanation that the public company needed “more dynamic activities”. In fact, the local authority turned *Studio B* from a channel with a mild bias in favour of the previous ruling Democratic Party (DS) into an outlet with an aggressive propaganda orientation in favour of the new ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). *Studio B* was privatised in late 2015. The new owner did not introduce any editorial or personnel changes. At the time of his dismissal by the local authority, Timofejev very clearly depicted the situation: politics brought me to the position, and politics replaced me.

While the Democratic Party did not even try to conceal its political influence on the appointments of editors-in-chief, the new ruling party, the SNS, does the opposite. One of the features of its rule, with strong authoritarian tendencies, is the denial of any influence on media editors and consequently on media production, while the public space for opposition discourse is getting narrower and the credibility of civil society institutions lower since the SNS became the governing force.

A good example of the new patterns of work of politically affiliated editors-in-chief is Ljiljana Smajlović, current chief editor of the national daily *Politika*, still partially owned by the state. Smajlović was appointed to this position in 2013, by the Management Board of the *Politika* publisher, dominated by the SNS. The appointment marked her second mandate at *Politika*, since

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she had already served as editor-in-chief of this daily in the period 2005-2008. In her first term, Smajlović was close to the orientation of Vojislav Koštunica's party, the DSS, and became editor-in-chief when Koštunica served as Prime Minister. She was dismissed when Koštunica lost his political position, after the 2008 political victory of the Democratic Party. However, Smajlović likes to emphasize that she was dismissed for political reasons and does not accept that her appointment in 2005 was also politically motivated. Although in 2005 she already had a considerable reputation as an experienced and analytical journalist with keen views on political and international matters, her political preferences were obvious and closest to the third line in the conflict between the blocks of national and democratic orientation, the national-democratic one, being the one that coincided with the priorities of the DSS.

During her first term, Ljiljana Smajlović defended herself and *Politika* journalists from external pressures by making them public. She revealed that *Politika* had been under pressure from the biggest Serbian businessman and media advertiser, Miroslav Mišković. She also reported pressure coming from the office of the Serbian President and DS leader, Boris Tadić. Other chief editors were exposed to the same pressures, but none dared to talk about them publicly, except for Veran Matić, who reported pressures on B92 by Mišković.

Ljiljana Smajlović later became president of UNS, the Association of Journalists of Serbia. With the legitimacy of a politically dismissed editor, she actively fought against the influence of the Democratic Party on the media and against the legal measures which restricted freedom of the media. She was also very active in the establishment of the Press Council, the first journalistic self-regulatory body. However, once again at the forefront of *Politika* at the time of the government of Aleksandar Vučić, the chief editor of *Politika* is no longer as consistent a fighter for media professionalisation and ethical journalism as she used to be. *Politika* is not a direct propagandist for Vučić's government. However, it does not problematise Vučić's decisions or investigate their negative effects. Where it is a leader, is in the attacks on government critics, trying to question their legitimacy and credibility and thus to undermine potential sources of opposition, be that from international organisations, independent state bodies or civil society organisations. The chief editor praises *Politika* as the freest and most professional media outlet because its regular columnists come from different political factions. She never mentions that these free editorials occupy only two pages in the daily. In the remaining 22 pages, or more, there are no critical opinions, but the thematic priorities coincide perfectly with the priorities of the government. Additionally, Ljiljana Smajlović does not refrain from undermining the authority of the Press Council when appeals against *Politika* are being reviewed, even though the council is the very body she greatly helped to establish.

The editor-in-chief is not only a bridge between journalists and owners/founders of the media – as the position is often simplistically interpreted. It is the site where the interests of various stakeholders in the process of media information production meet: sources of information, media financiers, owners, journalists and audiences.

A whole range of challenges face the chief editors on a daily basis. Seekers for positive publicity are numerous, and by admission of the chief editors, include not only the current financial and political centres of power, but also the political parties in the opposition, civil society organisations that want greater visibility and uncritical treatment, criminal circles and individual criminals. A chief editor interviewed for this report says that his most difficult job is to “*motivate the underpaid journalists.*” Another editor finds it most difficult to change the mentality of employees and teach them that conversations with editors are aimed at making clear “*how something could be done instead of why something could not be done.*”

The basic weakness of the position of chief editors is a result of inconsistent legal stipulation of their rights and obligations. In accordance with the normative ideals of journalism in the service of the public interest, media legislation deals with the rights and obligations of editors-in-chief from the standpoint of the interests of the audience, the public's right to know and to be protected from unethical communication. However, the rights of chief editors are only formally listed. There are no sanctions in the law for violators of these rights. Additionally, editors and other journalists have the same rights. The obligations, however, exist only for editors. Even though the penalties for breach of the obligation to respect the rights of other participants in communication are clearly defined, they are not efficient.

The Law on Public Information and Media (2014) stipulates that editors (and journalists) cannot be discriminated against, exposed to pressure, threatened, blackmailed or physically attacked. However, except for cases of physical assault, the Law does not provide any mechanisms for exercising the rights of chief editors. Penalties for violation of these rights and freedoms are not prescribed. Even in cases where, for example, sources of information discriminate against some editors and media and favour others, which is visible and can be easily proved, there is no penalty for violators. Editors are thus forced to make concessions to the main sources of information, especially government bodies, in order to stay out of the circle of ignored or blackmailed media outlets.

Another unregulated but very important relation is the one with the owners, since the ownership and managerial sides exert strong pressures that endanger editorial autonomy. In the majority of media systems, this relationship is a matter of internal regulation, while the law imposes some sort of obligation

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for the formal demarcation of journalistic and managerial competences in order to protect editorial autonomy. Serbian legislation, however, does not insist on this demarcation, even in the case of public media. Protection from pressure on editors and journalists by the owners and directors thus remains a right inscribed only on paper and far from actual realisation.

In terms of obligations of the chief editor toward the public and protection of the public from unethical communication, the legislation is clearer and more specific. The Law on Public Information and Media obliges editors to respect the presumption of innocence, privacy, the rights of minors, prohibition of incitement to discrimination, hatred or violence, all under threat of punishment. The law specifically regulates in detail the obligations of editors in respect of the right of reply and the right to a correction, which may relate to various actors in any communication. Violations of these obligations are subject to misdemeanour penalties or court decisions on the damage done to the party who decides to sue the editor responsible for the personal damage.

However, the legal regulation of editorial obligations is insufficiently effective. The professional norms of journalism are massively violated on a daily basis.⁶ This is especially the case with the violation of the presumption of innocence, the right to privacy and the prohibition of discrimination. The judicial procedures that charge penalties for these types of offences can be extremely prolonged. The awarded monetary damages are always much smaller than compensation requested by the injured parties. They are paid from media revenues, so the editor-in-chief does not bear any direct responsibility or feel any particular damage, aside from injury to a personal reputation. Pressures from other interests and actors on the editors-in-chief to act counter to professional ethics are therefore much more powerful than any legal pressure on them to respect the rights of others and professional codes.

A few years ago the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia (NUNS) offered Serbian employers a model of an employment contract for chief editors that plugged the legal gaps and encouraged media owners, editors and journalists to protect media integrity while respecting the Code of Journalists of Serbia. The proposed contract defined the rights of editor-in-chief in relation to the owner/founder, along with the obligations of the founder toward the chief editor, as well as relations between chief editor and journalists. For example, under this agreement, the founder would be obliged not to exercise either direct or indirect influence over the decisions of the chief editor in implementing the editorial policy of the media, especially any influence based on the

6 According to a survey by the Press Council during nine months of 2015, newspapers violated the ethical rules of the profession 3,357 times. See <http://www.savetzastampu.rs/latinica/vesti/33/2016/01/29/937/monitoring-postovanja-kodeksa-novinara-srbije-u-dnevnim-novinama.html>. Accessed 2 April 2016.

ANOTHER UNREGULATED BUT VERY IMPORTANT RELATION IS THE ONE WITH THE OWNERS, SINCE THE OWNERSHIP AND MANAGERIAL SIDES EXERT STRONG PRESSURES THAT ENDANGER EDITORIAL AUTONOMY. PRESSURES FROM OTHER INTERESTS AND ACTORS ON THE EDITORS-IN-CHIEF TO ACT COUNTER TO PROFESSIONAL ETHICS ARE THEREFORE MUCH MORE POWERFUL THAN ANY LEGAL PRESSURE ON THEM TO RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS AND PROFESSIONAL CODES.

abuse of ownership rights.⁷ In the same manner as the law guarantees the rights of journalists in relation to the editor (that they would not be demoted or punished for publishing a true claim, for refusing to carry out orders that violate the ethical rules of journalism or contradict the editorial concept) the proposal gave these rights to the editor-in-chief in relation to the owner/founder.

It is not known whether any of the media in Serbia adopted this contract proposal, which ensures the independence of chief editor that the law failed to provide.

5 THE APPOINTMENT AND DISMISSAL PROCEDURES

The employment contract for the chief editor proposed by NUNS also compensates for the lack of general or internal legal regulation of the conditions under which the chief editor can be dismissed. Namely, all rights of the chief editor are exercised in such a way that editors “cannot be fired, their earnings cannot be reduced, nor can the position in the newsroom be worsened.” Media legislation does not deal with the procedure for dismissal of editors-in-chief, while the procedure for their selection is handled rather superficially and applied only in two cases – the public service media and the media in minority languages, founded by the councils of national minorities. In both cases, the law specifies that the selection is performed on the basis of a public competition.

By public competition, a chief editor is given the legitimacy of the winner in an open professional competitive arena. This strengthens his/her position in relation to journalists of lower rank. However, all other aspects of the election, i.e., the appointment and dismissal of chief editors, are left to the will of those who elect them.

According to the Law on Public Service Broadcasting (2014), the chief editors of *Radio Television of Serbia (RTS)* and *Radio Television of Vojvodina (RTV)* are formally elected by the Management Board. However, the main role in the procedure is given to the Director General, who nominates editors to the Management Board as part of his/her team. Despite a democratic election procedure (public competition), the chief editors have no independent basis of authority, which may reduce the effectiveness of editorial activities. In the case of minority media, a final decision is made by the Management Board of the publisher. However, the Management Board is elected by the National Council of the National Minority, which is politically structured and exercises strongest pressure on chief editors, according to editors of minority media.

Many of the editors interviewed for our study do not think that the procedure for the appointment of chief editors is important or that it has an impact on their situation, even when it involves the participation of journalists. Several

7 See http://www.novimagazin.rs/public/uploads_ck/files/ANEKS%20UGOVORA%20O%20RADU-%20GLAVNOG%20I%20ODGOVORNOG%20UREDNIKA.pdf. Accessed 2 April 2016.

MEDIA LEGISLATION DOES NOT DEAL WITH THE PROCEDURE FOR DISMISSAL OF EDITORS-IN-CHIEF, WHILE THE PROCEDURE FOR THEIR SELECTION IS HANDLED RATHER SUPERFICIALLY AND APPLIED ONLY IN TWO CASES – THE PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA AND THE MEDIA IN MINORITY LANGUAGES, FOUNDED BY THE COUNCILS OF NATIONAL MINORITIES.

editors did believe that journalists should be consulted in the selection of the chief editor, because this contributes to trust and cooperation within the newsroom and additionally obliges chief editors to protect professional goals instead of the organisational (ownership) goals. Others, however, think that the owners/founders have every right to decide who they will hire as a journalist and who as an editor-in-chief and that nobody has the right to influence these decisions, not even the journalists.

They also think that the division of roles and responsibilities between journalists and owners or the general director of the public service broadcaster as concerns the selection of the chief editor is not rational, because it makes the chief editors ambivalent in loyalty toward these two sides. Regardless of differences in opinion, the practice among different media outlets is uniform: journalists do not have a strong role in the selection and dismissal of chief editors, not even a consultative one, even though their most overall mood is somewhat consulted.

In the absence of normative regulation, the rights and obligations of chief editors are mainly based on custom and the legacy of the past. The socialist period left a tradition of strong hierarchical relations, both in the subordinate role of editor-in-chief in relation to those who elected him, and in the stance of the chief editor towards those who are under him.

The Law on Public Information and Media protects journalists from arbitrary action on the part of the chief editor and gives them the right to refuse an editor's order without consequences if it violates regulations or codes of practice and ethics of the journalistic profession. They also have the right not to sign their work if its meaning has been altered during the editorial process. In practice, however, this rarely happens. There are testimonies from journalists about employment contracts containing a clause stipulating that they have "*the duty to do everything at the order of the editor,*" which eliminates the legal protection of journalists' rights.

Yet, in these complex relationships, the most important element is the fact that the editor-in-chief lacks mechanisms for protection from the pressures exerted upon him/her by the authorities by whom he/she was elected or appointed, whether that be the general director, as in the case of public service broadcasters, the founders' board, the individual media owner or the director as the owner's most direct representative.

THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENT IS THE FACT THAT THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF LACKS MECHANISMS FOR PROTECTION FROM THE PRESSURES EXERTED UPON HIM/HER BY THE AUTHORITIES BY WHOM HE/SHE WAS ELECTED OR APPOINTED.

6 THE ECONOMIC POSITION OF EDITORS

Data on the economic position of chief editors is scarce. It is consistently and coherently kept secret by all types of media. However, in January 2016 the new management of the public service broadcaster *RTS* published data on the earnings of all its employees for the last three months of 2015. The previous

RTS management had refused to disclose any financial data and preferred to pay a fine for contempt of the decision of the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance that the operations of the public service broadcasters were a matter of public interest. The average net salary of *RTS* employees was about 48 thousand RSD, i.e. about 400 euro per month. Seven percent of employees had earnings above 600 euro, including chief editors and their assistants and deputies. The average net salary of the editor-in-chief for TV programming amounted to 1,500 euro, of deputy editors to 1,130 euro and 950 euro, respectively, and of assistant chief editor, to about 1,000 euro. At the radio station, earnings were considerably lower: 846 euro for the chief editor, 585 for the deputy editor and 557 for the assistant chief editor.

One can only guess about the earnings of other editors-in-chief. In our interviews with 5 editors-in-chief, only two provided data on their salaries. In one case, it was between 400 and 800 euro, in the second less than 400 euro. The majority of other journalists that we interviewed said that the size of the salaries of editors-in-chief was not known to other employees. They also believed that their salaries were neither adequate for the amount of effort invested, nor reflective of the importance of the job of an editor, but they held identical opinions about the earnings of other journalists, as well. Estimates are that editors' salaries are significantly higher than those of journalists, who earn about 400 euro in the capital city and about 300 euro in other places. Higher wages come with the position of the editor and usually do not depend on the economic success of the particular media outlet.

Because of their inadequate salaries, it is not uncommon for chief editors to have an additional work engagement somewhere else. This is a point of divergence between chief editors and other journalists. All the chief editors that we interviewed think that chief editors should not be prevented from performing other paid work (which can increase the visibility of their media), while other interviewed editors believe that editing should be their only job.

The financial rewards for being editor-in-chief do certainly constitute one motive driving journalists towards the position of chief editor. However, that is not a mechanism that stimulates the editor-in-chief to stay true to his professional credo. The general economic poverty in the media industry creates a poor professional atmosphere on all counts. It undermines the professional freedom of all journalists, while encouraging their obedience, self-censorship and apathy. The prevalent system of media funding creates the strongest threat to professional integrity. It forces the media to enter into corrupt ties with sources of revenue, whether these be advertising companies, media buying agencies connected with political circles, or government bodies and political parties. Editors are not in a position to mount a defence against the dependence of their media on financial sources and the expectation of preferential media content which has not been cut short by owners and managers. The most they can do is to avoid compelling the journalists to compromise their personal integrity.

EDITORS ARE NOT IN A POSITION TO MOUNT A DEFENCE AGAINST THE DEPENDENCE OF THEIR MEDIA ON FINANCIAL SOURCES AND THE EXPECTATION OF PREFERENTIAL MEDIA CONTENT WHICH HAS NOT BEEN CUT SHORT BY OWNERS AND MANAGERS. THE MOST THEY CAN DO IS TO AVOID COMPELLING THE JOURNALISTS TO COMPROMISE THEIR PERSONAL INTEGRITY.

When asked to list the conditions necessary for achieving a strong and independent position of chief editor, a majority of 12 editors and experts interviewed for this report put the personal characteristics of editors in first place. These are knowledge (general and vocational), a strong professional identity and reputation (experience) and personality traits. They put institutional factors, such as the improvement of the economic situation, better legal status and a more elaborate system of professional rewards and recognitions behind the personal characteristics of editors.

This response can be explained in two ways. One is that the interviewees are forced to create professional myths in order to remain in a profession that has experienced so many negative highlights. They believe that enthusiasm on the part of unique individuals can save journalism as a profession. This belief is seen more clearly in the links made by interviewees between the position of chief editor and the necessary qualifications. These include a broad general education, complemented by extensive professional knowledge (the journalistic trade and the entire chain of production of the media content) and familiarity with the specific features of journalism in other countries, new technologies, media literacy and media regulation. Additionally, the chief editor is seen as a person with extensive working experience and a high professional reputation earned by, among other things, a respect for the ethical standards of the profession. Next, the editor-in-chief is associated with a proven record of personal integrity backed by the experience of resisting pressure, a recognisable commitment to strengthening democratic values and finally with broad managerial skills and an affinity for modernisation and innovation.

The other way of reading the reaction of our interviewees is that they represent the media which have managed to resist full economic captivity and institutional patronage and still retain professional self-esteem.

Although their perception of chief editors seems utopian against the background of the research findings on the deep crisis of journalism, it does show that the professional culture has not abandoned professional ideals and still plays a strong role in the behaviour of at least some editors-in-chief.

Nothing in the profile and position of today's editors-in-chief empowers them for the protection of media integrity. The legal framework does not equip them with powers to protect professional goals ahead of other agendas. The appointment procedure serves to position the editor-in-chief closer to the owner and to management than to journalists and their obligations towards the public. Their economic position is unstable and stimulates them to fight for the survival of the media rather than for professional development. However, some media work only in order to produce revenues for their owners, appropriate benefits for their financiers and wages for their employees. Others struggle to

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serve the public and escape the permanent or long-standing patterns of instrumentalisation. Decisions about the work of the media between these two models do not fall to editors-in-chief, but to the owners and managers. However, editors do contribute to the media performance. They give a stamp to the media, the profile of an editorial orientation (which is determined by the owner or founder) and create the public image of the media. Editors-in-chief create the atmosphere in the newsroom, motivate journalists to work and affect the extent to which their work is based on professional ethics. They are the moral and professional authorities who determine whether or not others will aspire to professional, responsible and ethical journalism. The editor-in-chief is the first and last defence of journalists from external pressures.

On the practical side, not much has been done to improve the position of editors-in-chief, especially with regard to the idea of uniting editors in a special association, which was launched in the media community more than a year ago. The idea of a professional association of chief editors rests on the assumption that the job of editing is different from the reporting job and that this group of media professionals needs to build their professional standards so as to allow them editorial independence and protection from pressures by the government, politics and media owners that is better than the protection they now have.

The originator of this idea is Siniša Isakov, a former Director General of public service broadcaster *Radio Television of Vojvodina*, and technical director of *TV Novi Sad*, and an electrical engineer by education. He is a long-time employee of *RTV* and a big supporter of the concept of public service broadcasting. Isakov says that he failed to find support for his idea among the chief editors.⁸ However, he believes that such an association would be the appropriate means for establishing the ethical journalism standards that professional journalist associations have so far failed to promote successfully for a variety of reasons.

According to Isakov, opponents of the idea point out that all editors are primarily journalists, and that journalists' associations already exist. However, the challenges faced by chief editors are not the same as those affecting journalists. Associations like the one he proposes do already exist in many countries, and in some, for example in the Netherlands, they form a collective member of the Press Council.

Perhaps the editors who want to be more actively involved in the effort to re-professionalise journalism will base the mechanism for greater impact on the better future of journalism on the idea of own association. If chief editors are recruited from those two-fifths of journalists who, according to the study on the precarisation of journalism, still believe in professional ideals despite the increasing precariousness of their work and life, then journalism has a chance to survive as an industry operating in the public interest and towards consolidation of democratic processes in Serbia.

8 Interview with Siniša Isakov, former Director General of *Radio Television of Vojvodina* and current advisor to Director General, Novi Sad, 21 March 2016.

NOT MUCH HAS BEEN DONE TO IMPROVE THE POSITION OF EDITORS-IN-CHIEF, ESPECIALLY WITH REGARD TO THE IDEA OF UNITING EDITORS IN A SPECIAL ASSOCIATION, WHICH WAS LAUNCHED IN THE MEDIA COMMUNITY MORE THAN A YEAR AGO.

1. Editors-in-chief should establish an association and use it as a tool for improving their legal, economic and professional position. The association should strive towards protecting media integrity and ask for support from the media freedom defenders whenever the media is exposed to pressures on editorial policy.
2. Media legislation should better balance the rights and obligations of editors-in-chief and provide enhanced protection of their professional rights, rights which are now only formally listed but not efficiently defended.
3. Public service broadcasters should make the procedure for the appointment of editors-in-chief as transparent as possible. This could ensure selection of the best candidates, diminish the ground for election along political lines and increase audience trust in the public service broadcasters.
4. The Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia (NUNS) should better promote its proposal for a specific work contract for editors-in-chief and lobby for its adoption in media that strive to protect media integrity, especially in public service broadcasters.

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LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Božidar Andrejić, editor, daily *Danas*,
Belgrade, 23 March 2016.

Ivan Cvejić, editor-in-chief, *Beta news agency*,
Belgrade, 18 March 2016.

Siniša Isakov, former Director General of
Radio Television of Vojvodina and current
advisor to Director General, Novi
Sad, 21 March 2016.

Mitko Jakovlevski, former editor, specialist in
media education, Belgrade, 19 March 2016.

Jelka Jovanović, editor, weekly *Novi magazin*,
Belgrade, 18 March 2016.

Dalila Ljubičić, executive director, Media
Association, Belgrade, 25 March 2016.

Đorđe Vlajić, former editor-in-chief, *Radio
Belgrade*, Belgrade, 17 March 2016.

Assistant to editor-in-chief of a national dai-
ly, Belgrade, 27 March 2016.

Editor-in-chief of a magazine in a minority
language, Novi Sad, 30 March 2016.

Editor-in-chief of a news portal, Novi Sad,
29 March 2016.

Editor at the national public service broad-
caster, Belgrade, 18 March 2016.

Editor at the regional public service broad-
caster, Novi Sad, 27 March 2016.

Editor at the regional radio in Central Serbia,
22 March 2016.

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This report has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The contents of the report are the sole responsibility of the Peace Institute and the author, and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.

The report has been produced within the project South East European Media Observatory. <http://www.mediaobservatory.net>.

AUTHOR Jovanka Matić EDITOR Brankica Petković
ASSISTANT EDITOR Saša Panić TRANSLATION Jelena
Jovović LANGUAGE EDITOR Amy Kennedy PUBLISHER
ER Peace Institute, Institute for Contemporary Social
and Political Studies, Metelkova 6, SI-1000 Ljubljana,
Slovenia, <<http://www.mirovni-institut.si>>. DESIGN
DAK, Ljubljana, May 2016

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