

THE EDITORS' ROLE IN MEDIA INTEGRITY PROTECTION IN MACEDONIA

UNDER THREAT AND POLITICAL PRESSURE

by ZORAN BOJAROVSKI

INTRODUCTION

The majority of the editors and the media in Macedonia operate in an environment influenced by the political centres of power and often even under threats. The political pressure backed by the media owners mainly results in a biased, partisan and non-comprehensive journalism.

In the creation of this environment, the editors and the media owners have failed to distance themselves from party politics. On the contrary, the lack of independence has made the media into collaborators in the creation of a divided and politicised society devoid of fair and balanced media reporting.¹

The selective reporting and the absence of editorial independence at the public service broadcaster *Macedonian Radio and Television (MRT)* are particularly worrisome. The chief underlying reason is the appointment of editors, a process which is completely controlled by the ruling coalition.

Cooperation by the editors with the self-regulatory bodies is poor. Not only do they not participate proactively in the work of these bodies, but they also do not respect the decisions and recommendations that relate to their work.

Holding key positions in the media, the editors are responsible for the current situation wherein little space is allocated for freedom of expression and open debate in Macedonia.²

A recent regional study has revealed a practice of subtle and direct pressure by political and business actors on journalists, a practice that is executed through the editors. The findings point out that editors have a peculiar role in

1 European Commission, *Commission staff working document: The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Report 2015*, 10 November 2015. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia.pdf. Accessed 10 March 2016.

2 NGO Info-center and Media Development Center, *Slobodata na izrazuvanje i na združuvanje vo mediumite vo 2015 godina: analiza*, 2016. Available at: http://nvoinfocentar.mk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Analiza_sloboda-na-izrazuvanje_2015_final-1.pdf. Accessed 5 April 2016.

the clientelist chain, and some are said to be permanently in contact with the political actors or the owner of the media outlet.³

In the same sense, the 2015 EU Commission progress report on Macedonia noted that the corollary rights of the media to impart information and ideas which are of public interest, and of the public to receive them, are undermined by regular political interference in the editorial policies of the media, in particular mainstream nationwide broadcasters.⁴

The political and media crisis in the country deepened further in 2015 with the publication of intercepted conversations that showed senior government and ruling party officials suggesting breaches of fundamental rights, interference with judicial independence, media freedom and elections, and politicisation and corruption in various fields.⁵ In order to assist in the identification of the real causes of the political crisis and to find pragmatic solutions thereto, the European Commission established an independent group of experienced experts that produced a report and put forward recommendations on these issues. The report notes, *inter alia*, the “*existence of an unhealthy relationship between the mainstream media and top government officials, with the former seemingly taking direct orders from the latter on both basic and fundamental issues of editorial policy.*”⁶

This report examines the general context of and the situation with editors in Macedonia, as well as the role they play in protecting or harming media integrity. The scope of this research is to find out when and how the situation with the editors changed, and how political, economic, legal, educational, or other circumstances, contributed thereto.

The research was conducted in the period from February to April 2016, using several qualitative methods for collecting and analysing data: 10 in-depth interviews with editors, media professionals, and representatives of media organisations and the media industry, a survey of 12 editors, as well as qualitative analysis of the legislation, official documents and reports of national and international institutions and other relevant research. Unfortunately, the survey

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3 Trpevska and Micevski, *Zošto e važen integritetot na mediumite*, 2014. Available at: [http://www.mim.org.mk/attachments/article/824/zosto_e_vazen_integritetot_na_mediumite_mk_v2\(1\).pdf](http://www.mim.org.mk/attachments/article/824/zosto_e_vazen_integritetot_na_mediumite_mk_v2(1).pdf). Accessed 1 March 2016.

4 European Commission, *Commission staff working document: The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Report 2015*, 10 November 2015. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia.pdf. Accessed 10 March 2016.

5 Ibid.

6 Senior Experts' Group on systematic Rule of Law issues, *The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on systematic Rule of Law issues relating to the communications interception revealed in Spring 2015*, 8 June 2015. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/news_corner/news/news-files/20150619_recommendations_of_the_senior_experts_group.pdf. Accessed 5 March 2016.

response rate fell short of our expectations. Contrary to the agreement, only 3 of the editors to whom we distributed the survey responded.

1 INTEGRITY, THEN AND NOW

A comparison between the role and the integrity of the editors “then and now”, inevitably leads to the distorted image of editors that prevails nowadays. It stems from the absolutely forgotten role of the media as a promoter and protector of the public interest.

Furthermore, the widely-held impression is that the majority of media owners do not understand the concept of the media and the meaning of the journalistic profession, which reflects badly on the work of the editors.

“The owners run the media like running a shoe factory. They do not understand the responsibility of the media in society, and hence the responsibility of the editors,” says Erol Rizaov, a participant in this research.⁷ Rizaov started his career as a journalist at *Nova Makedonija*, one of the two newspapers in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. Now he recalls that in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, all journalists supported the anticipated political changes. However, according to him, the situation with the media today is much worse. *“There are more media outlets, but without substance,”* says Rizaov.⁸

Editors used to have a bigger and more essential role, whereas today the decision-making editorial role belongs to the managers and the owners, adds Zoran Andonovski, currently an editor at the *Meta* news agency, with extensive experience as both a journalist and an editor.⁹

Comparing the past and the current situation, Naser Selmani, the president of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM), concludes that the editors themselves should ensure and safeguard editorial integrity, regardless of the political system in which they operate.

However, various studies and reports have revealed the existence of serious business and clientelist relationships between the media owners and the political centers of power in Macedonia. *“The editors have a special place and role in this relationship, thereby establishing a triple symbiosis in which professional journalism and ethical standards do not exist,”* says Žaneta Trajkoska, director of the School of Journalism and Public Relations.¹⁰

The findings of a recent study reveal the widespread practice of appointing loyal and obedient people to the key newsroom positions, and the

7 Interview with Erol Rizaov, editor and commentator, *Utrinski vesnik*, Skopje, 4 March 2016.

8 Ibid.

9 Interview with Zoran Andonovski, editor-in-chief, *Meta* news agency, Skopje, 3 March 2016.

10 Interview with Žaneta Trajkoska, director, School of Journalism and Public Relations, Skopje, 16 March 2016.

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marginalisation and sanctioning of journalists who express critical opinions and a desire for autonomy.¹¹ This study confirms today's prevailing opinion that editors make sure that the interests of the media owner – politician, tycoon or advertiser – are realised, even at the expense of direct censorship of the journalistic content.

Today, some editors are in an unnatural symbiosis with the political actors, the judiciary and the media owners, a situation in which the editors, along with some journalists, are either foreign, and therefore undesirable, or part of the symbiosis that causes severe consequences such as a setback in the main function of the media as a defender of the public interest, as well as a decline in the quality of democracy in the country.

The “then and now” perspectives pose a symptomatic paradox: instead of strengthening their role in the media compared to the former and more restrictive system, editors in today's democratic society are being squeezed between the interests of the owners and the leaders of the political parties. This situation undermines editorial integrity, thereby influencing the essence of the media as an independent source of information operated in the public interest.

2 THE EDITORS IN THE LEGISLATION

The media legislation in Macedonia has been reformed in recent years and harmonised with the international standards which mainly arise from the EU criteria for media regulation, given that Macedonia is a candidate country for membership in the EU. However, the comparison of the legislation with actual media practice immediately reveals a serious discrepancy between the laws and the everyday operation of the media and the editors.

The Media Law guarantees freedom of expression and freedom of the press, stipulating that freedom of the media particularly includes “*freedom of expression, independence of the media, independence of the editor, journalist, authors or creators of content or programme associates and other persons in compliance with the rules of the profession*” (Article 3).¹²

In addition, the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, which lays down the principles that need to be followed when conducting business activity, stipulates that the broadcaster shall ensure the autonomy, independence and

11 Trpevska and Micevski, *Zošto e važen integritetot na mediumite*, 2014. Available at: [http://www.mim.org.mk/attachments/article/824/zosto_e_vazen_integritetot_na_mediumite_MK_v2\(1\).pdf](http://www.mim.org.mk/attachments/article/824/zosto_e_vazen_integritetot_na_mediumite_MK_v2(1).pdf). Accessed 1 March 2016.

12 Media Law, Official Gazette of RM No. 184, 26 December 2013. Available at: http://www.avmu.mk/images/Zakon_za_mediumi_mkd.pdf. Accessed 5 March 2016.

THE COMPARISON OF THE LEGISLATION WITH ACTUAL MEDIA PRACTICE IMMEDIATELY REVEALS A SERIOUS DISCREPANCY BETWEEN THE LAWS AND THE EVERYDAY OPERATION OF THE MEDIA AND THE EDITORS. APART FROM INTERNAL CALLS FOR THE EDITORIAL POSITIONS AT THE PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTER MRT, THE EDITORIAL STAFF IS NOT CONSULTED ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT THEY SUPPORT THE APPOINTMENT OF CERTAIN CANDIDATES.

accountability of editors, journalists and other authors involved in the creation of programmes and editorial policy (Article 61).¹³

Furthermore, under the law, the media publisher may consult the editorial staff or colleagues in the newsroom on the appointment or dismissal of the editor-in-chief (Media Law, Article 7).¹⁴ However, apart from internal calls for the editorial positions at the public service broadcaster *MRT*, the editorial staff is not consulted about whether or not they support the appointment of certain candidates.

Tamara Causidis, the president of the Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers (SSNM), says that the articles of the law covering the protection mechanisms for appointment of editors have to be implemented, so that editors in the newsrooms could be evaluated by the editorial staff for appointment or dismissal.¹⁵

The additional instrument that would have made this non-existent legal commitment possible is the provision of union collective agreements to protect the editors, since these agreements are signed between the trade union and the owners of the media. The media owners have shown reluctance thus far.¹⁶

3

MRT EDITORS – TORN BETWEEN THE PARTY AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

The public service broadcaster, *MRT*, constitutes an important part in the analysis of editors and integrity.¹⁷

MRT has continued to fail entirely in its role as a public service broadcaster for the citizens. It does not represent the public interest, but acts to the benefit of the government as a direct agent and tool of government propaganda.¹⁸

GIVEN THE LEADING POSITION OF EDITORS IN THE DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURE, IT IS CLEAR THAT THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE POLITICALLY BIASED, TENDENTIOUS AND MANIPULATIVE REPORTING OF MRT LIES IN THE WORK OF THE EDITORS.

13 Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, Official Gazette of RM No. 184, 26 December 2013. Available at: http://www.avmu.mk/images/Zakon_za_audio_i_audiovizuelni_mediumski_uslugi_mkd_1.pdf. Accessed 7 April 2016.

14 Media Law, Official Gazette of RM No. 184, 26 December 2013. Available at: http://www.avmu.mk/images/Zakon_za_mediumi_mkd.pdf. Accessed 5 March 2016.

15 Interview with Tamara Causidis, president of the Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers and editor at BIRN, Skopje, 16 March 2016.

16 Ibid.

17 The data presented in this chapter refer to the period before April 2016. Monitoring conducted in April 2016 showed a slightly improved quality of reporting at *MRT*, compared to the past. See Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, *Prv izveštaj od monitoringot na mediumskoto pretstavuvanje vo vestite vo periodot od raspišuvanjeto na izborite do početokot na izbornata kampanja 15-24 april 2016 godina*, April 2016. Available at: http://www.avmu.mk/images/Izvestaj_za_monitoring_15-24_april.2016.doc. Accessed 5 May 2016.

18 Media Development Center and Dimovski, *Zakonite vo mediumskata sfera: predizvik za slobodata na mediumi*, March 2015. Available at: http://mdc.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/CRM_Zakonite-vo-mediumskata-sfera_Predizvik-za-slobodata-na-mediumi-Mart-2015.pdf. Accessed 6 March 2016.

MRT continuously violates professional journalistic standards in informing the public. Given the leading position of editors in the decision-making structure, it is clear that the responsibility for the politically biased, tendentious and manipulative reporting of *MRT* lies in the work of the editors. Their decisions contribute to a selective approach to the facts, always motivated by the intention to support government policies and positions.¹⁹

This is completely contrary to the legal provisions pertaining to the operation and reporting of *MRT*.

As a public service broadcaster of the Republic of Macedonia, it is – according to the legislation – independent from any state body, other public legal entity or enterprise and should be impartial towards them in its editorial and business policy.²⁰

The journalists and editors at *MRT*, as well as those directly involved in the production of programming at *MRT*, inter alia, are obliged to abide by the principles of accuracy, impartiality and completeness of information (the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, Article 111). This obliges editors to adhere to the principle of political balance and plurality of viewpoints by providing unbiased, comprehensive and relevant information and presenting this in a clear and unambiguous manner so that the citizens are able to freely form their opinion.²¹

Moreover, the editors are required not to advocate or defend positions or interests of a specific political party, association, personal interest, religion or ideology but to respect the opinion and beliefs of others in their programming. In order to achieve this, editors and journalists are required to comply with the principle of political independence and autonomy of journalists (Media Law, Article 3).²²

The Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services also defines the obligations of *MRT* in terms of producing and broadcasting programming and the programme services, as well as the standards and principles of operation, while identifying the role of the editors of programme services and the newsrooms as the leading role (Articles 110 and 111).

However, several analyses of reporting by *MRT* on key socio-political processes show that it violates the law and persistently fails in its role as a public service for Macedonian citizens and does not represent the public interest.²³

EDITORS AND JOURNALISTS ARE REQUIRED TO COMPLY WITH THE PRINCIPLE OF POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE AND AUTONOMY OF JOURNALISTS.

19 Ibid.

20 Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, Article 104, Official Gazette of RM No. 184, 26 December 2013. Available at: http://www.avmu.mk/images/Zakon_za_audio_i_audiovizuelni_mediumski_uslugi_mkd_1.pdf. Accessed 7 April 2016.

21 Ibid.

22 Media Law, Official Gazette of RM, No. 184, 26 December 2013. Available at: http://www.avmu.mk/images/Zakon_za_mediumi_mkd.pdf. Accessed 5 March 2016.

23 OSCE and Council of Europe, International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Presidential and Early Parliamentary Elections, 27 April 2014, *Statement on the first findings and recommendations*, 28 April 2014. Available at: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/fyrom/118078?download=true>. Accessed 11 March 2016.

For instance, OSCE noted a bias in the editorial policy of *MRT*, especially during the election period.²⁴ This is a result of the approach of the editors at this media outlet, which clearly illustrate their professional bias.

4 JOB SECURITY FOR EDITORS

Both the professional status of editors and the security of their job positions are uncertain and left to arbitrary decisions by media owners.

However, in rare cases, the rights and responsibilities are determined in agreements concluded between the editors-in-chief and the managers or owners of the particular media outlets.²⁵ Even then, such agreements are valid only until the first problem occurs, as confirmed by some of the interlocutors in this research.²⁶

Editors and the editors-in-chief are often subject to arbitrary replacement. Not only is there no consultation with the editorial staff on the appointment or dismissal of the editor, there is also a system of constant transfers of editors among a selection of suitable media.

In recent years, the whole media scene in Macedonia has turned upside down. According to the media reports, many transfers and replacements of journalists and editors have occurred. In five years, approximately 50 editors and journalists left their positions or were replaced on account of pressure by or at the whim of the owners.²⁷

The most illustrative example in this period is the replacement of the editor-in-chief of *Utrinski vesnik*. Two editors-in-chief were replaced in 2011.²⁸

In addition, there were similar changes around the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016, when the editors-in-chief of two daily newspapers as well as the editors from the newsroom in *MRT* were replaced or transferred to other

24 Media Development Center and Dimovski, *Zakonite vo mediumskata sfera: predizvik za slobodata na medijumi*, March 2015. Available at: http://mdc.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/CRM_Zakonite-vo-mediumskata-sfera_Predizvik-za-slobodata-na-medijumi_Mart-2015.pdf. Accessed 6 March 2016.

25 Interview with Tamara Causidis, president of the Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers and editor at BIRN, Skopje, 16 March 2016.

26 Interview with Zoran Andonovski, editor-in-chief, *Meta* news agency, Skopje, 3 March 2016.

27 *Meta* news agency, "Rich journalistic and editorial harvest: How did freedom fall?" 4 May 2015. Available at: <http://meta.mk/en/bogata-novinarska-i-urednichka-zhetva-kakopagashe-slobodata/>. Accessed 7 April 2016.

28 R. F., "Urednički smeni: Promeni vo *MRT*, smeni i vo privatni medijumi – se sproveduva ili se minira dogovorot od Pržino!" *Faktor portal*, 14 January 2016. Available at: <http://faktor.mk/2016/01/14/urednichki-smeni-promeni-vo-mrt-smeni-i-vo-privatni-medijumi-se-sproveduva-ili-se-minira-dogovorot-od-przhino/>. Accessed 15 March 2016.

BOTH THE PROFESSIONAL STATUS OF EDITORS AND THE SECURITY OF THEIR JOB POSITIONS ARE UNCERTAIN AND LEFT TO ARBITRARY DECISIONS BY MEDIA OWNERS. EDITORS AND THE EDITORS-IN-CHIEF ARE OFTEN SUBJECT TO ARBITRARY REPLACEMENT. IN FIVE YEARS, APPROXIMATELY 50 EDITORS AND JOURNALISTS LEFT THEIR POSITIONS OR WERE REPLACED ON ACCOUNT OF PRESSURE BY OR AT THE WHIM OF THE OWNERS.

“suitable” media.²⁹ Zoran Andonovski points out that these editors are not in a position to oppose these unjustified “transfers”.

The Association of Journalists of Macedonia and the Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers do address these issues, but, despite their constant reactions, they have not produced any changes. Zoran Andonovski says that “*the AJM support means nothing more than moral satisfaction.*”³⁰

It is noteworthy that such transfers of editors usually occur in relation to more serious political processes or in a pre-election period. The essence of these externally requested and orchestrated transfers of editors stems from the need of the political centres of power to continually demonstrate that they will not permit matters to escape their control. The occasional transfers of entire editorial teams create a sense of insecurity and fear, leaving the editors without a choice. They got into in this situation because, during negotiations on the terms of their appointment or employment, the professional integrity of editors was not subject to discussion.

5

EDITORS AS SERVANTS AND CHEAP LABOUR

Data on the salaries and the agreements of media editors constitute one of the biggest secrets in the profession. The confidentiality of this data is even considered virtuous and is perceived as fair play among owners, managers and editors. However, lately there has been a drastic decline in the labor value of editors.

Tamara Causidis, the president of the Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers (SSNM), says that the editors do not have any job security, since they “*can be replaced after a single phone call.*” The oral agreements allow for such occurrences. These agreements render them vulnerable to management decisions.

Causidis reveals that, owing to the insecurity, the editors, especially the editors-in-chief, sign executive contracts in order to protect themselves by being entitled to damages.

One study by the Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers conducted on journalists and editors has shown that as many as 90 percent of the respondents are dissatisfied with the salary they receive for their work (44 percent are not satisfied at all, 46 percent are “just” dissatisfied), while only 10 percent believe that they are adequately paid for their work.³¹

The editors remain the best paid media workers within the structure of the journalistic profession. However, Causidis reveals another unusual trend: the

THE EDITORS REMAIN THE BEST PAID MEDIA WORKERS WITHIN THE STRUCTURE OF THE JOURNALISTIC PROFESSION. HOWEVER, THE LABOUR VALUE OF EDITORS IS DRASTICALLY DECLINING. THE AVERAGE NET SALARY OF EDITORS RANGES FROM 400 TO 500 EURO PER MONTH.

29 Ibid.

30 Interview with Zoran Andonovski, editor-in-chief, *Meta* news agency, Skopje, 3 March 2016.

31 Georgievski (ed.), *White Book of Professional and Labour Rights of Journalists*, 2014. Available at: http://ssnm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/White_Book_ENG.pdf. Accessed 1 March 2016.

labour value of editors is drastically declining. The average net salary of editors ranges from 400 to 500 euro per month.³² For instance, Vasko Maglešov also confirms a decline in the salaries of editors. During his career at the previous media company where he worked, when he was promoted to editor, his salary remained the same as when he had been a reporter.³³

Today, salaries are almost 50 percent less than the usual salary from 5-6 years ago, which ranged from 1,000 to 1,500 euro per month. There were instances when the monthly salaries of some editors-in-chief reached up to 2,000 euro.³⁴

6 EDUCATION – NON-DECISIVE FOR BECOMING AN EDITOR

The educational background of editors in Macedonia predominantly involves Journalism Studies at the Iustinianus Primus Faculty of Law at the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. According to the available data, this picture is completed with the addition of some graduates from the School of Journalism and Public Relations, and from other studies such as literature, philosophy, law or economics. However, the education of the editors has never had any decisive influence on their appointment or in relation to their immediate work in newsrooms, since the criteria for choosing editors are not based on educational and professional standards but primarily on the political motivation of the owners.³⁵

The general political and media context, which has resulted in derogation of the journalistic profession, influences the decision to study journalism. The number of students is falling. Young people do not want to study journalism.³⁶ Conversely, in 1977 when the study programme was first introduced, 125

32 Interview with Tamara Causidis, president of the Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers and editor at BIRN, Skopje, 16 March 2016.

33 Interview with Vasko Maglešov, editor, *TV 21*, Skopje, 28 February 2016.

34 Plusinfo, “MPM ima problem so svoj urednik so 5.000 evra plata,” 2 September 2015. Available at: <http://plusinfo.mk/vest/38532/mpm-ima-problem-so-svoj-urednik-so-5000-evra-plata>. Accessed 5 April 2016. (Please note that the data on salaries in the main body of the text refer to monthly net salaries, while the title of the article referred to in this footnote as the source of data includes gross monthly salary of an editor.)

35 Interview with Žaneta Trajkoska, director, School of Journalism and Public Relations, Skopje, 16 March 2016.

36 Sevieva, “Opaĝa brojot na studenti: Mladite ne sakaat da studiraat novinarstvo” (interview with Jasna Bačovska, head of the Journalism Study Program at the Iustinianus Primus Faculty of Law in Skopje), *Telegraf.mk*, 16 January 2016, Available at: <http://www.telegraf.mk/ns-newsarticle-233484-opagja-brojot-na-studenti-mladite-ne-sakaat-da-studiraat-novinarstvo.nspX>. Accessed 10 April 2016.

THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS IS FALLING. YOUNG PEOPLE DO NOT WANT TO STUDY JOURNALISM. IN THE ABSENCE OF SYSTEMATIC AND SUPPORTED DEVELOPMENT OF EDITORS, IT IS UP TO THE PERSONAL ETHIC AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE EDITOR TO FORGE A COMMITMENT OF EDITORIAL INTEGRITY.

students enrolled, which is the highest number in the history of the Iustinianus Primus Faculty of Law. In 2015, only 30 students enrolled in the programme.

Despite the number of universities that offer graduate and postgraduate studies in journalism and communications,³⁷ they have had no significant effect on the media practice by which editors, together with managers and owners, collaborate with the government.³⁸

When it comes to informal education, Žaneta Trajkoska, the director of the School of Journalism and Public Relations and one of the founders of the Macedonian Institute for Media, says that “*the effect of training is very small when the media is corrupt.*”³⁹

In his long career as an editor, Zoran Andonovski attended several training courses for editors. He says that the experience of these training courses is extremely good; however, the knowledge cannot be applied in Macedonian journalistic practice, since the training courses offer professional recommendations that apply only in normal conditions. “*On a more serious note, the Macedonian media reality is far from normal,*” says Andonovski.⁴⁰

The young editor Vasko Maglešov has a similar view. He has attended many training courses, which were approved by the newsrooms just to demonstrate care for the development of their employees. “*Whenever I came back from training, I was told that the newly acquired knowledge should stay in the notebooks of the workshops,*” concludes Maglešov.⁴¹

All interlocutors in this research agree that, in the absence of systematic and supported development of editors, it is up to the personal ethic and responsibility of the editor to forge a commitment of editorial integrity, one which should subsequently allow the newsroom to resist the temptations coming from the managers and owners.

7 POLITICIANS, OWNERS AND EDITORS: A CLOSED CIRCLE OF INTERESTS

The place of the editors in the closed circle of mutual interests in the company of the politicians and the owners has contributed significantly to the limited freedom of the press and the undermined integrity of the editors. Naser Selmani, the

37 Postgraduate studies in journalism and communications are taught at the Iustinianus Primus Faculty of Law at the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, at the Goce Delčev University and at the Institute of Communication Studies, founded by the School of Journalism and Public Relations.

38 Interview with Erol Rizaov, editor and commentator, *Utrinski vesnik*, Skopje, 4 March 2016.

39 Interview with Žaneta Trajkoska, director, School of Journalism and Public Relations, Skopje, 16 March 2016.

40 Interview with Zoran Andonovski, editor-in-chief, *Meta* news agency, Skopje, 3 March 2016.

41 Interview with Vasko Maglešov, editor, *TV 21*, Skopje, 28 February 2016.

THE PLACE OF THE EDITORS IN THE CLOSED CIRCLE OF MUTUAL INTERESTS IN THE COMPANY OF THE POLITICIANS AND THE OWNERS HAS CONTRIBUTED SIGNIFICANTLY TO THE LIMITED FREEDOM OF THE PRESS AND THE UNDERMINED INTEGRITY OF THE EDITORS.

president of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia explicitly states that this situation goes some way towards making editors into party activists.

This trend is also affected by a practice that has been particularly evident in the last 10 to 15 years: every change of government is followed by changes in the editorial policy, i.e. in order to match the needs of the new government. This is not a new phenomenon. It has been identified as a warning in many reports and analyses. Subsequent media practices included disqualification of editors and journalists as well as the closure of several media critical of the government. This tendency darkens the media space in the country and thus its democracy.⁴²

Other research study concludes that the attitudes and the interests of the businessmen, on the broader market and not just the media market, often influence media editorial policy and can have severe consequences for its objectivity.⁴³

These processes culminated in the last five years. After the early elections in 2011, several political events clearly demonstrated the unnatural relationship between the media i.e. their owners and editors-in-chief, and the ruling party. This practice was confirmed by Vasko Maglešov, former editor at *Sitel TV*, who recalls several situations in which it was intervened in the work of the editors.⁴⁴

Media close to the ruling parties played a particularly shameful role in the case of the brutal murder of the young Martin Neškoski by a member of the special police unit. After the murder, all media supporting the ruling parties failed to report on it, and even orchestrated a cover-up of the case.⁴⁵

Total control over the news production was established in the pro-government media after the 2014 elections, and there were even death threats against critical journalists in the years that followed.⁴⁶

The executive director of the self-regulatory body Council for Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM), Marina Tuneva, in her evaluation of the editorial role, does not depart from the assessment that they are under exceptional and unscrupulous

42 Nikodinoska and Šopar and Jakimovski (eds.), *Analiza: Razvojot na mediumite vo Makedonija spored indikatorite na UNESKO*, January 2012. Available at: http://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/408/unesko_indikator_i_v3.pdf. Accessed 5 March 2016.

43 Ordanoski (ed.), *Zarobena demokratija - Razvojot na sopstveničkata struktura na mediumite vo Republika Makedonija*, October 2012. Available at: [http://www.transparentnost.mk.org.mk/Upload/dokumenti/Finalen%20PDF%20Zarobena%20demokratija%20\(web\).pdf](http://www.transparentnost.mk.org.mk/Upload/dokumenti/Finalen%20PDF%20Zarobena%20demokratija%20(web).pdf). Accessed 20 March 2016.

44 Interview with Vasko Maglešov, editor, *TV 21*, Skopje, 28 February 2016.

45 Apostolov, "Kako MVR se obiduvашe da ja sokrie vistinata za ubistvoto na Martin Neškoski," *Fokus*, 17 June 2011. Available at: <http://fokus.mk/kako-mvr-se-obiduvashе-da-ja-sokrie-vistinata-za-ubistvoto-na-martin-neshkoski/>. Accessed 2 April 2016.

46 Telegraf.mk, "Skandalozno: Mrtovečki venec ispraten za novinarot Borjan Jovanovski," 21 April 2015. Available at: <http://www.telegraf.mk/aktuelno/makedonija/ns-newsarticle--264964-skandalozno-mrtovecki-venec-ispraten-za-novinarot-borjan-jovanovski.nspX>. Accessed 20 April 2016.

SUBSEQUENT MEDIA PRACTICES INCLUDED DISQUALIFICATION OF EDITORS AND JOURNALISTS AS WELL AS THE CLOSURE OF SEVERAL MEDIA CRITICAL OF THE GOVERNMENT. THIS TENDENCY DARKENS THE MEDIA SPACE IN THE COUNTRY AND THUS ITS DEMOCRACY.

pressure. *“The Council is regularly in contact with the editors, but they are still skeptical about the power of self-regulation,”* concludes Tuneva.⁴⁷

The Council, as well as the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, the Macedonian Institute for Media, the Independent Trade Union, and the Institute for Communication Studies, fully supported the announced reforms as part of the political negotiations for overcoming the crisis in the country. However, for largely unexplained reasons, the reforms of the media were left off the agenda in the final negotiations. Tuneva says that it would have been much easier if the basic requirements had been accepted, including amendments to the media regulations, many of which are expected to contribute to ensuring greater independence for editors.⁴⁸

8 CASE STUDIES

8.1

A FUNERAL WREATH FOR A CRITICAL JOURNALIST

In 2015, the family of Borjan Jovanovski, editor of *TV Nova*, received a funeral wreath at the door of his family home. Some unknown person came looking for Jovanovski and when his wife replied that he was not at home, the stranger gave her the funeral wreath, along with the message: *“This is a gift from Todor Aleksandrov.”*⁴⁹ After handing over the wreath, the person escaped on foot.

Jovanovski is known for his critical stand towards the government of VMRO-DPMNE, and according to media reports, he has for years been subject to verbal threats by media and journalists who are close to the VMRO-DPMNE.

The journalism community perceived this act as harassment of the Jovanovski family, but also as a threat to all critical media and journalists if they confront the government. Although the ruling party condemned this act, journalists and civil society activists gathered the next day in protest in front of the government – in order to “return the funeral wreath to the sender.”

8.2

INTEGRITY MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

“Had it not been for the support of my editors, my investigation into Skopje 2014 would not have been possible. I received several awards by the media for my investigative reports on the recommendation of the editors. I remember that, one

47 Interview with Marina Tuneva, executive director, Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia, Skopje, 9 March 2016.

48 Ibid.

49 For many years, Todor Aleksandrov has been a controversial figure in Macedonian history. Until recently, the ruling party VMRO-DPMNE acknowledged him as one of the early 19th-century fighters for an autonomous Macedonia.

time, the editor-in-chief received a suggestion from the owners that I should 'ease up on' the pressure. To take a break from the topic. But my editors never asked me to do that. Rather, they rejected the suggestion and told me to continue writing more often on the topic."⁵⁰

This is the testimony of Milka Smilevska, currently the head correspondent of the regional TV network *Al Jazeera*. In her statement she recalls the times when she was working as a journalist at *Alfa TV* in 2009. Back then, she was reporting on the grandiose project Skopje 2014, which was announced after VMRO-DPMNE won the early parliamentary elections for the second time in the autumn of 2008.⁵¹ Since the beginning of 2009, when the first monuments were installed, Smilevska revealed the first deals that indicated suspicious transactions among the partners of the government for the realisation of the project.⁵²

She stresses that she owes a lot to her editors, who had the professional integrity to support and protect her and knew how to transfer that integrity to their journalists.

8.3

MLADENOV'S DEATH - LOSS OF A LOUD CRITICAL VOICE

On 27 March 2013, Nikola Mladenov, one of the most distinguished editors in Macedonia and owner of the well-known *Fokus* magazine, died in a car accident near Skopje. This was considered an immense loss for Macedonian journalism, considering the role that *Fokus* magazine had in building critical thought in the fragile democratic society over the past 20 years.

Under Mladenov's guidance, *Fokus* magazine has been profiled as a media outlet which highly values freedom of expression, critical thinking, and investigative and analytical genres, a phenomenon that has always been scarce in the media environment of Macedonia. By critically observing political and societal processes, *Fokus* became known as an opponent of every government in Macedonia. This is why Mladenov and the magazine were often the target of political attack by various high officials, who had taken the magazine to court on many occasions. It was not surprising when, two years after his death, the scandal involving intercepted communication revealed that he had been among the most frequently wiretapped media professionals in the country.

Despite the uncertain future of the magazine, Mladenov's family and colleagues, after a brief interval, managed to continue publishing *Fokus* magazine. In tribute to an editor who left a strong imprint on Macedonian journalism, the Macedonian Institute for Media entitled the award for best investigative story

IN TRIBUTE TO AN EDITOR WHO LEFT A STRONG IMPRINT ON MACEDONIAN JOURNALISM, THE MACEDONIAN INSTITUTE FOR MEDIA ENTITLED THE AWARD FOR BEST INVESTIGATIVE STORY OF THE YEAR - THE NIKOLA MLADENOV AWARD.

50 Interview with Milka Smilevska, correspondent from Macedonia, *Al Jazeera*, Skopje, 17 March 2016.

51 Prizma database, Skopje 2014 pod lupa, 3 May 2016. Available at: <http://skopje2014.prizma.birn.eu.com/mk>. Accessed 5 May 2016.

52 Smilevska, "12 milioni evra za noviot muzej na VMRO," *Alfa TV*, 14 April 2011. Available at: <http://alfa.mk/News.aspx?id=22667#.vvgUKOJ971U>. Accessed 5 March 2016.

of the year – the Nikola Mladenov Award. In the turbulent moments that followed Mladenov's death, when the country fell into political and societal crisis, one of Mladenov's adages was often used as a credo by journalists and citizens' movements: *"We want a society of free people, which offers equal opportunities for all; they want a crowd of invertebrates who succeed because of blind obedience to the party tribe. And there can be no compromise here!"*

9

CONCLUSION: A NEED TO BREAK WITH EDITORS' ROLE IN POLARISATIONS

For editors in most of the media in Macedonia, there are only two options – either they choose submissive relationship with the two main agents – the owners of the media and the political centres of power, or face unscrupulous pressure from these same agents.

The environment of high political polarisation and politicisation of the entire system has also divided the media. Therefore the prevailing perception of journalists and editors in Macedonia is either they are pro-government or pro-opposition.

Despite the legislation aligned with the European standards, the laws fail to function because the overall system is dysfunctional. Moreover, the system does not operate in accordance with the law, because it is tailored to operate on the principle of clientelism.

Our respondents, experienced journalists, editors and media experts, are even more expressive when describing the editor's professional integrity: in the triangle of owners-politicians-editors, most of the editors act as political commissioners and executors of outside powers. They uncritically serve the interests of the political centres of power or business interests and routinely violate professional standards. False information is broadcasted on regular basis and presented as news, contributing to the creation of fabricated media reality.

Nonetheless, even under these critical circumstances, there are media that operate according to high professional standards. Those few media that serve the public interest and apply critical and independent journalism despite the pressure they face, set a great example of good practices of protection of media integrity.

The efforts of the Council on Media Ethics of Macedonia also make a positive contribution. The council is in constant communication with the editorial teams, owing to the need for effective application of self-regulation. The challenge remains to persuade the managers and the owners.⁵³

53 Interview with Marina Tuneva, executive director, Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia, Skopje, 9 March 2016.

IN THE TRIANGLE OF OWNERS-POLITICIANS-EDITORS, MOST OF THE EDITORS ACT AS POLITICAL COMMISSIONERS AND EXECUTORS OF OUTSIDE POWERS. THEY UNCRITICALLY SERVE THE INTERESTS OF THE POLITICAL CENTRES OF POWER OR BUSINESS INTERESTS AND ROUTINELY VIOLATE PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS.

In order to strengthen positive sides of media development in Macedonia, it would be necessary to support and enlarge the group of editors and media which demonstrate integrity, possibly by establishing an association of editors. Based on their example, the current division into pro-government and pro-opposition media should be overcome, and a new perspective should emerge on the role of the media in Macedonia as guardians of common, public interest.⁵⁴

10 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The editors' position, responsibilities and independence from any internal or external pressures in performing their work in the media should be guaranteed with a signed agreement between the media provider and the editor.
2. The Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers should proactively negotiate and push for signing collective agreements between the Union and the media owners. The collective agreements should further protect the editors' position in the media.
3. The editors should cooperate more closely with the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia and accept its decisions and criticism, thus demonstrating their commitment to working in a professional manner for the public good.
4. The professional media and journalist associations should strengthen their capacities and intensify their activities in order to protect the editors and advocate their professional independence in the newsrooms.
5. Professionals with integrity, who are impartial and independent of political, commercial and other influences, should be appointed as editors in the *Macedonian Radio and Television*, thus being able to create editorial policy that will keep the public interest in focus.
6. Editors and those journalists with high professional integrity should establish an independent formal or informal network in the frame of the existing bodies (e.g. self-regulatory bodies) that will pursue and advocate respect for the principles of independence, professionalism and high ethical standards.
7. Informal, specialised education and international exchange programmes for editors should be offered on a more frequent basis by media and training centres. Such educational and exchange programmes should provide editors with opportunities to improve, advance and refresh own professional capacities and identity, knowledge and skills for leading the modern newsrooms.

54 Interview with Žaneta Trajkoska, director, School of Journalism and Public Relations, Skopje, 16 March 2016.

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AUTHOR

ZORAN BOJAROVSKI holds a Bachelor's Degree in Comparative Literature from the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. Currently, he is a producer at *Alfa TV*. He previously worked as editor-in-chief and deputy editor-in-chief at various print and broadcast media in Macedonia. Bojarovski contributed this report as a researcher engaged by the Macedonian Institute for Media, a partner organisation in the SEE Media Observatory.



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AUTHOR Zoran Bojarovski **REDACTOR** Vesna Nikodinska **EDITOR** Brankica Petković **ASSISTANT EDITOR** Saša Panić **TRANSLATION** Ana Despotovska **LANGUAGE EDITOR** Amy Kennedy **PUBLISHER** Peace Institute, Institute for Contemporary Social and Political Studies, Metalkova 6, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, <<http://www.mirovni-institut.si>>. **DESIGN** DAK, Ljubljana, May 2016

THE EDITORS' ROLE IN MEDIA INTEGRITY PROTECTION IN MACEDONIA UNDER THREAT AND POLITICAL PRESSURE