

LOCAL MEDIA: Between politics and professionalism

WRITTEN BY: Mladen Zadrima, journalist

When the subject of the local media, founded by the local authorities in Montenegro, is being brought up, it is usually associated with the media under the influence of those who are in positions of power in a particular municipality. That is, sadly, the case most of the time. The misperception that, budget financing is perceived as a volition of a political party rather than as redirected funds provided by citizens through taxes, surcharges, and other fees, have warped the view of what the local media is, or should be. It should be in service of all citizens because the local media also, belongs to those who did not vote for those in power. So simple, and yet so complicated.

According to the premise that the one who provides the money is ultimately, in charge, this warped image has established itself as “normal” over time. And, of course, the one in charge, appoints and assigns members of the Council of Local Media Houses, then, appoints and assigns the executives according to the opinions and preferences of the political parties in power. The executive and editorial positions in the local media have always been a nickel for undermining pre-election and post-election trading, to the detriment of the public, and its right to be fairly and unbiasedly informed on all issues related to the life of the commune.

Undoubtedly, in such circumstances, censorship is dominant, and the media is being managed openly and without restraint, from someone’s cabinet. Opposing this would result in the director's departure, reduction of budget funding, sophisticated but also, open pressure which, due to existential reasons, forces people to be frightened complaisant, rather than fearless individuals fighting for their own and the profession’s reputation. Therefore, with few exceptions, local media generally speak affirmatively and report on the functioning of local authorities, without investigating possible omissions or cases of corruption, and the greatest "achievement" is the live broadcast of local assembly sessions. A blend of music, sports, advertisements and commercials, some prize game, same old topics

such as the pandemic, vaccinations, weather forecast, and a guest who must never criticize the government ... So, anything that does not directly jeopardize the local nomenclature.

Following the example of Radio (television) Cetinje, it is possible to surgically precise detect what may happen to the employees in the local media who do not play along with those in power. How, on the one hand, as hopeless as it may seem, the foundations of the profession are defended, and how, on the other hand, through a number of "techniques", constant pressure is imposed on the media at the risk of breaking the law. And how, among other things, "party-installed" executives are "tamed" and loosen their meddling in editorial affairs and politics once they comprehend the core of the media. Furthermore, how budget funds are being cut off due to political reasons, how the agency responsible for those matters turns its head away from it, how the media community is silent, how the courts obstruct the execution of verdicts, how the first instance court's prosecutor does not find elements of the crime of obvious robbery and embezzlement, how party bots spread lies ... An example to all others what may happen to them if it comes to their minds to stand up in defense of the profession and the right of the public to know. The fact that the workers were owed 56 salaries at one point and the awareness that this could happen to anyone who does not obey, and that no one has ever been held accountable for the damage, shows how, in essence, the government contemplates and treats the local media.

Under the umbrella of the former Broadcasting Agency, the government's regulatory body in this sector and through its initiative, the Union of Local Public Broadcasters (ULES) was founded, conceived as a lobby group that will work to protect and promote media rights and freedoms, encourage joint activities of members to achieve protection and improve the freedom of action of local public broadcasters, support members in improving the production, coverage, and broadcasting of programs at the local level, etc. How successful they were in implementing the objectives of their program could be the subject of a special research. In the abovementioned example of the old royal capital's media, ULES, except for a few futile statements, together with the patron, ARD, did nothing to stop the mistreatment of employees in the Radio Cetinje at that time.

Still, despite all the problems and adversities, local broadcasters are indeed irreplaceable and very useful because in the area they cover there is no serious

competition when it comes to service information, informing citizens about local affairs.

In addition, generations of journalists have emerged from the local media, some of whom have gone beyond the local framework and built the image of professionals and free-spirited people, who write or work for media that cover a large number of viewers, listeners, and reach a wide readership.

Unique in Europe, Montenegro, has a network of local public broadcasters. When the media laws were drafted in 2003, these electronic media were to be privatized or shut down. Thanks to the intervention of the IREX office in Podgorica and the efforts of the then consultant Hendrik Busik, a formula for their transformation was devised for local broadcasters by analogy with the National Public Service. The main reason for this was the fact that around 3,000 people were working in the sector at the time, with research showing that local stations at the time were the most popular ones.

From the current viewpoint, despite the good legal framework, all the "mastery" has been shown when it comes to satisfying the form and implementing the party's intention, for example, to lobby NGOs close to them from the local government, to propel a person close to the authorities. Or when cultural institutions, the authorized subject for proposing prominent individuals from cultural life, delegate to the management of the local media an economist from a state-owned company. Or when a local community in which there are no radio or TV signal delegates to a member of the Council, a local authority representative.

Anticipating the new legislations, from election to election, from budget to budget, the project to project, local broadcasters work as they work, always on the edge, fearing whether and who will "grab" the power and who will come and who will go...

Because, as one savant said, everything can be taken away from man, with the exception of the last in the list of human freedoms - the right to choose its position in any given circumstances, the right to choose its path.

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