

Opening Speech by Marijana Camović

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The level of media freedom in Montenegro can best be described by the meagre number of media professionals who are left in the job.

Working conditions in the media have never been worse before. Since the beginning of this year, four media outlets have been closed. Among them, only the smallest one which employed a small team compensated their employees. In other media outlets workers were laid off without compensation. Around 15 media outlets have their bank accounts blocked by the banks due to bankruptcy, according to Central Bank data. Some of these accounts have been blocked for years.

Delaying salary payment is a common practice in certain media. The latest phenomenon is that employers who have not paid their employees are playing victims. They complained louder than those they owed the wages to. They claim that they have to defend themselves from the "evil" trade unionists who they said were "harassing" asking for their wages, a legitimate claim!.

Facing problems from different sides, employers are arrogant towards the people they employ. Journalists work up to 12 or even 15 hours a day for the Montenegrin media, as shown in a recent survey of the OSCE. The situation is getting worse. Those who still have jobs are forced to do more with lower wages. This of course affects the quality of their work they do, which has an impact on the readers and listeners and the psychology of journalists. Journalists are expected to write about violations of the rights of employees in other industries, and such stories are published in the media. However, the media they work for have worse violations of labour rights than those they write about. What a hypocrisy. How can a journalist who is prohibited from defending his/her rights be expected to fight for someone else for a better society?

Layoffs happen frequently, and the process of selecting the employees to be dismissed is not transparent. Despite the reduction of the number of employees, reducing salaries and numerous other cuts at the expense of journalists, the media situation is not improving. For example, the print sector is becoming ever smaller as well as the ratings of key news programmes. This means that the measures undertaken do not give the desired results. And what will our employers do about it - continue to resign and reduce wages. The question is when will lay-offs come to managers and the people who regulate newspapers. They are the ones who reduced 15000 copies sold down to 3000 copies. Their policies prevent journalists from expressing their opinions. I doubt that any of the directors or chief- editors thought that the problem includes themselves as they have been in the jobs for 10 or more years.

Knowing them, I doubt that this will happen because it is much more pleasant to lament over their evil fate rather than taking responsibility. It is easier to talk about democracy than to practice it. To whom does the media freedom relate, who should be free? The answer is clear - there can be no media freedom if journalists are not free. This message should be repeated until it becomes the reality.