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Technical Assistance to
Public Service Media
in the Western Balkans



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EXAMINING AND ASSESSING EDITORIAL GUIDELINES/CODES OF CONDUCTS IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Introduction:

Any code of conduct, ethical guidelines or programme principles for off- or online public service media shall include the following basic principles, outlined by the European Broadcasting Union as well as the [IFJ Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists](#). It is to be:

- impartial & independent
- fair & respectful
- accurate & relevant
- connected & accountable.

How can we ensure this in the transition countries of the Western Balkan where editorial freedom is not very high on the agenda throughout all media including psm?

According to the Council of Europe (CoE), “Independence is the core requirement for every public service media organisation. Without demonstrable independence of action and initiative, from government as well as from any other vested interest or institutions, public service media organisations cannot sustain their credibility and will lose (or never gain) popular support as a forum for carrying forward the national debate and holding power to account.”

Given a recent sharp increase in self-censorship in South Eastern Europe¹ maintaining editorial independence is a huge challenge for public service media (PSM) across Europe, we focus this project on the Western Balkans. The culture of political influence combined with constant economic pressures continues to put this independence at high risk. A successful ethical eco-system based on self-regulation must involve all stakeholders including civil society in a transparent inclusive manner

Whilst most of the public service media have editorial guidelines, they are often poorly implemented or observed in practice. Editorial guidelines are extensive documents which need to be properly communicated to relevant staff members. Editorial teams require regular training in their practical application, thereby ensuring that they are integrated into their daily work. This process requires concerted efforts; it requires time, proper communication within editorial offices; and internal agreements. In addition, editorial guidelines need to be regularly updated in order to keep pace with changes in the operating environment, such as user-generated content and the use of social media.

Apart from political sensitive issues, journalists also face the pressure of increasing workload which can compromise the quality and editorial independence.

¹ <https://book.coe.int/eur/en/human-rights-and-democracy/7284-journalists-under-pressure-unwarranted-interference-fear-and-self-censorship-in-europe.html>

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The public service broadcasters in the Western Balkans take very different approaches when it comes to developing editorial guidelines. Where they exist, they are generally of high quality, developed in collaboration with international experts and covering all areas of programming and ethics. In some instances (Kosovo and Montenegro), they are linked to public service broadcasting law and oversight is provided by Programming Councils. However, most media observers agree that political imperatives usually override the tenets of existing editorial guidelines which do little to protect journalists or producers from political interference.

The codes analysed are all made for public service media only. In some European countries, such as in Belgium and Norway, there is only one code that fits for all media. The Norwegian Code has defined the editorial position and its protection in details. In this region only the Croatian and Macedonian codes have foreseen the existence of a regulatory body within the Media Public Service for which it has determined the number of members and the procedure for its operation.

The following overview shall give some more insights into the current challenges to be tackled during this project led by the IFJ and EBU.

I would like to thank in particular Zeljka Lekic-Subasic and Vojislav Raonic for their valuable insights and their field reports from each country. I would like to thank Radka Betcheva, EBU for her assistance and EFJ affiliates from the region for having provided useful information and responded to questions without which this report would not have been possible.

Overview:

1. Albania:

The editorial principles for the Albanian public service media RTSH/ALBRTV (Radio and Television of Albania) were for the first time developed in 2016 with the support from the EBU and OSCE office in Albania, but also in consultation with civil society in Albania. The guidelines were based on the BBC rules of conduct and the Slovenian public broadcaster editorial rules. They cover radio and television as well as online portal of RTSH and its social media presence.

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While lack of working contracts and political interference also when it comes to appointing staff, has been a characteristic of Albanian public service media, we hope these recent changes will have a considerable impact.

The OSCE/ODIHR report on the June 2017 parliamentary elections stated that RTSH showed a balanced approach to campaign reporting.²

For the first time in the history of the broadcaster, the editorial principles, an elaborated and rather impressive document, were approved and reflecting a modern professional approach. To guarantee full transparency it is in addition to a printed available on the broadcasters' website in both Albanian and English languages. Its goals include the crucial and challenging task to avoid self-censorship among journalists and editors. It also includes the need for constant fact-checking – an ever more important goal in times of so-called “fake news” and 24 hours breaking news environment. Protection of sources following the CoE standards, respect for diversity, investigative journalism, elections reporting etc., the importance of terminology are all in this text. Its introduction says: “This manual comes as a need to change and improve the current situation and to codify in a complete, qualitative and professional manner the basic principles, values and standards of work at the Albanian Public Radio-Television.”

The so-called guardian of these guidelines is the ethics council. According to the statutes, the steering council of RTSH should have its Council of Viewers and Listeners in charge for audience complaints, but it is not currently functioning. There is a complaint mechanism foreseen in the Code, - it is going to be an ombudsman for editorial principles. As this is not yet in place, it will be crucial to monitor and assist this process.

The inception mission report from April includes that the journalists, editors and other involved staff will soon have specific training about the editorial principles.

At the beginning of this year, Lufti Dervishi, who runs a political talk show at RTSH, conducted an online survey among journalists in the news desk to check the level of knowledge on the content of these editorial guidelines. The result shows that much more is needed to make these guidelines known: only very few of the journalists have actually read the document. He proposed that such surveys should be conducted regularly among journalists to raise awareness about the importance of them in the daily work.

² <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/albania/346661?download=true>

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Mr Dervishi said that the main challenge of the journalists working in RTSH is self-censorship, which is an increasing phenomenon among journalists throughout Europe. He also stressed that a lot of training is still needed in particular for political reporters, where lack of double checking, analysing and filtering the news is still the daily routine.

These challenges have to be seen in a general framework of a culture of self-censorship in Albania. In an environment where media outlets are dependent on political and business interests for financial survival "editors often act as censors rather than filters". More indirect pressure stems from the job insecurity journalists face.

Recommendations:

The main challenge now is the implementation of the editorial principles.

- Journalists need to know the code and understand its impact;
- News editors should be responsible in making the editorial guidelines known to all staff, employed and freelances;
- Journalists and media workers need to receive training and regular further training to comply to all ethical standards described in the document;
- These principles should be used not only as the code of ethics, but as the code of conduct in daily practice both to protect the journalists but also to guarantee the RTSH as a trusted source among the population
- The foreseen complaint mechanism in form of an ombudsman should be installed soon based on a transparent selection founded on purely professional criteria.

2. Bosnia and Herzegovina:

Background:

The issue of editorial independence within Bosnia and Herzegovina's three public service broadcasters cannot be seen outside the context of its need for financial stability. According to the latest EC country progress report (2018) the public broadcasters in the two entities continued to be exposed to political influence, particularly via their politically-controlled steering boards; worrying cases of self-censorship have been reported also in the state-level public service broadcaster. Entity-level legislation on public service broadcasters remains to be harmonised with the state-level law on Public Broadcasting Service.

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All psm have adopted editorial principles, which are obligatory for all three public broadcast services (BHRT (Radio and Television of Bosnia and Herzegovina), RTRS (Radio Television Republika Srpska) and FTV. These principles however are not respected; they were developed during the 1990s and adopted in 2004 and are in need of an urgent updating also to reflect the challenges of the digital environment. The journalists work under high pressure and their work is influenced on a daily basis. Public services work in the interest of political elites instead of the public interest, particularly when it concerns entities' broadcasters. Managerial structure in public services is based on political affiliation, thus undermining editorial and journalistic independence.

Not only practice of self-censorship but also censorship was reported by the BH Journalists Association, for example a planned and produced interview had been censored without giving any explanation why³.

"For as long as the PBS managerial structures are elected along ethnic lines, the editorial and journalist independence as the principles cannot be functional."⁴

According to the BH Journalists Association, BHRT may have been the most professional and independent broadcaster in the region until 2016, but in the last two years (since the election of the new BHRT Board of directors), their professionalism is increasingly declining.

There is consensus among the management of BHRT for an urgent update of the editorial principles as well as for the need of a strategy for its implementation in daily practice.

The BH Journalists' Association proposes such an update should be done based on the editorial principles adopted at the Albanian public broadcaster RTSH.

With the anti-corruption plan under preparation, which BHRT is obliged to have as a public institution in BiH, BHRT is also currently developing the ethical codex of behaviour for its employees. The ethical codex of Croatian Radio-Television will be used as a model, and it will also address the issue of BHRT's employees' presence on social media platforms.

BHRT has no complaints mechanism established.

³ Indicators on the level of media freedom and journalists' safety in, the Western Balkan, Summary of Findings, 2017

⁴ Srđan Puhalo, interviewed by Rea Adilagić and Milica Andrijašević, 01 June 2017.; Western Balkan's Regional Platform for Advocating Media Freedom and Journalists safety

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According to the Journalists' Association's General Secretary Borka Rudić, such internal complaint mechanisms are crucial to allow listeners and viewers to comment on the way public service duties and reporting are done.

Recommendations:

Improving the work of three public services in BiH is an area that requires more interventions and improvements in accordance with EU public service standards, political independence, separating the influence of the Board of Directors on the choice of the editor and the director, and updating editorial guidelines.

- To upgrade the Editorial Principles of psm in BiH in line with International principles, for example, the Albanian editorial principles also covering online and social media, if possible as a joint building capacity for all three public services in BiH, followed by in-house training involving all stakeholders to assure its successful implementation;
- To build an extensive training scheme, for younger journalists in particular and mid-generation editors in the area of: freedom of expression and political independence (including the rights of journalists and the protection of those rights), in the area of investigative journalism (research techniques, facts checking, use of several different and non-viable sources information), in the field of innovative techniques and modern journalistic concepts in the production of media content, and thematic education in the field of peace building, tolerance, reconciliation, diversity reporting, combating hate speech, reporting on vulnerable and minority groups, etc. ... - all themes which are included in the Ethical principles for RTSH;
- To assure funding for such urgent training;
- To develop a complaints mechanism in cooperation with all stakeholders including civil society.

3. Kosovo⁵:

Radio Television of Kosovo (RTK) adopted its own code, the Professional Standards and Journalistic Ethical Principles, which were drafted in November 2015 and updated in 2016 also covering online production and social media. It is considered to be very extensive and advanced.

⁵ All references to Kosovo, whether the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with the United Nation's Security Council Resolution 1244, and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

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The code of conduct is part of the working contracts for journalists, and according to RTK management the relevant extracts of the code have been sent to journalists ahead of important events, like elections.

Management believes that journalists are aware of the content of the code, and that the extent of its usage in practice is quite satisfactory. The RTK Board of Directors esteems that the content of the RTK's code of conduct as well as with the functioning of the complaints mechanism and its role within it is satisfactory

The complaints mechanism is regulated through the Advisory Audience Council comprised of 5 members, which is providing complaints to the Board of Directors, and Board of Directors is discussing those complaints with the General Director of RTK. RTK is broadcasting in its program an advertising video clip with the instructions for the audience whom to address with their complaints and in which way.

Also the Kosovo Press Council is satisfied with the content of the RTK's code of conduct and complaint mechanism; its biggest remark is related to the expertise of the journalistic staff at RTK who "often get job through the personal and family connections" rather than their own professional references.

This rather positive assessment is confirmed by Lorik ARIFAJ, Director of Television of Radio Television of Kosovo, who says that all journalists are aware of the code of ethics, which is also visible for the public. Every employee is informed to respect the code. Especially during the elections journalists are advised to refer to it. The same applies for emergent situations about other issues, such as trials, violence etc. The code is not used by all journalists but according to Arifaj, there have been cases in which journalists were sent to the legal office for reviewing before being broadcasted.

Each journalist who signs agreement of work (contract) should sign a special annex paper that obliges him or her to read the code and consult it every time when they face issues that they might not be aware how to act. However, Lorik Arifaj acknowledges that the reality is not helping to achieve editorial independence from politics and economic interest groups. Self-censorship is high, and lack of funding is not helpful.

According to the Association of Journalists of Kosovo the code is poorly implemented in practice as described in the [Safe-journalists report Kosovo Indicators on the level of media freedom and journalists' safety 2016](#): Despite having internal standards, the management of the Radio and Television of Kosovo (RTK) has been publicly criticised many times for interfering in the work of editors.

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“Since there is a lot of public criticism against several individuals within the RTK that interfere in editorial policy and in the work of journalists, it says that something is really wrong there. This affects the work of journalists on what should they report or not. There are many problems that appeared in public, but they were not addressed enough.”⁶

A majority of the interviewed journalists claim that the code is poorly implemented in practice by RTK’s journalists and this is due to active political interference directly in the editorial policy. One journalist commented: “I have studied the RTK’s internal rules and the code of conduct and I consider it contains advanced standards. Unfortunately, those are not implemented by journalists and the reason is simple. It’s the impact of politics at public broadcaster.” Another journalist also said: “RTK does not have independence. There are editors that are servants to politicians. There was a case when an editor sent an SMS which said: “Chief did you like the story”” Despite having internal standards, the management of the Radio and Television of Kosovo (RTK) has been publicly criticised many times for interfering in the work of editors.

However, RTK editors and journalists are not alone in their experience of pressure and interference from management and/or owners and powerful individuals and groups from outside the media.⁷ One of the recommendations of the SE Media observatory is that media associations and civil society should support those RTK editors and journalists who are struggling to defend their professional integrity against political and economic pressure.

Recommendations:

Despite a very positive assessment about the content of the code, the knowledge among stakeholders including journalists, the code does not find proper implementation in order to ensure that interference from politics is deterred.

Given the highly politicised environment in Kosovo, it seems that the code does not protect journalists from self-censorship.

- More solidarity with other journalists and civil society in supporting RTK journalists and editors in their fight for more editorial independence is required;
- More training of journalists is needed including the management, when it comes to protecting journalists' need for editorial independence with the help of the code;
- Technical in-house training to improve knowledge and implementation of the ethical code is urgent.

⁶ Kreshnik Gashi, journalist, interview held on May 4th, 2016, see safe journalist report

⁷ <http://mediaobservatory.net/radar/editors-kosovo-struggle-professional-integrity-amid-poor-rule-law>

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4. FYR Macedonia:

The new government in a recent meeting with the European Federation of Journalists and its affiliate, the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) confirmed the need to adopt a media reform which includes to reform the public service media MRT, which needs improved funding and editorial independence. «*We want real professionals to work who are independent of political pressure, but we need the opposition to agree to our proposals*», said Robert Popovski, Minister for Communication, Transparency and Accountability, acknowledging the difficult heritage of control of the media by the former government.

The 2018 EC Progress Report on Macedonia indicates that the coverage of the electoral campaigns by the public service broadcaster (MRT) was more balanced than in the past and contestants were provided with free air-time. A code of ethics for election periods has been adopted in 2016 with advice from the BBC experts and local stakeholders.

After several years of announcements in 2017, MRT, as statutory obligation, adopted the Code of Ethics for journalists, creative personnel and all employees in MRT. This code has been met with more criticism by the journalistic community, which disputed the contents of the document, but also the approach of the MRT leadership, primarily due to the lack of transparency in the process of drafting the Code. The biggest shortcoming of the Code is according to the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) the interference of journalistic ethics with the subordination of the employment relationship. Moreover, it refers to “employees” of MRT, rather than to journalists. Additional efforts are needed to improve MRT’s independence and objectivity of reporting says the Journalists' Association.⁸

AJM submitted comments on the draft version of the Code of Ethics to MRT and recommended to prepare two separate documents, one for the ethical conduct of journalists following the example of the International Federation of Journalists⁹, and the second for other employees, i.e. for the technical and professional service on MRT. These remarks were not taken into account by the MRT leadership.

Pressure on journalists in MRT is different from journalists who work in commercial media. In MRT, journalists are primarily under internal pressure and disciplinary measures by presumptuous financial punishments, redistribution of other jobs, etc. In addition, MRT was still influenced by the structures of power that belonged to the former government.¹⁰ Regarding this, one of the experts interviewed said: “The public service is still strongly

⁸ see Indicators for the degree of media freedom and the journalists' safety, Macedonia, 2017 -

⁹ <http://www.ifj.org/about-ifj/ifj-code-of-principles/>

¹⁰ Indicators for the degree of media freedom and the journalists' safety, Macedonia, 2017

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influenced by the previous government, the management and editorial structures are the same from the previous period. This can be clearly seen from the MRT program.”¹¹

The AJM requests that the ethical commission in charge for its implementation in practice should include journalists; and not constitute of persons who have never worked as journalists and are nominated by the management of MRT.

The revision of these guidelines should be completed in the coming months. The ethical codex of Croatian Radio-Television, with a clear division between ethics and working discipline, should be taken as a model.

According to the MRT Management the biggest obstacle in its implementation is the lack of knowledge of journalists about its content.

The Macedonian Institute for Media believes that it is the task of the editor in chiefs to inform its journalists about the content of ethical codex and be responsible for its implementation in daily practice.

The complaints mechanism does not function in practice. According to the existing Law on Audio and Audio-visual Media Services Programming Council should “monitor the comments and suggestions of the audience regarding the broadcast program of MRT and considering them, may in writing request from the Director of MRT to adjust the scope, structure and overall quality of the program content”, but until now it only received a couple of remarks from NGOs, i.e. a direct relationship with audience members have not been established.

Recommendations:

Given the transition period between former government and new government with -it seems -good intentions to improve the independence of public service media, we propose:

- to improve the content of the code of ethics (not to confuse ethical standards with subordination in labour relations) based on Croatian and/or Albanian model in a transparent way and also include civil society;
- to better inform journalists and civil society and other involved staff of its content and provide training;
- To include journalists in the ethical commission to ensure professional implementation of the code.

¹¹ Snezhana Trpevska, interview with AJM team member, July 2017.

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5. Montenegro:

According to the 2018 EC Progress report, the initial positive developments on Montenegro's public service media (RTCG)'s editorial independence and professionalism were challenged by instances of undue political interference and political pressure on its Council last year. Several members of the RTCG Council were dismissed and replaced by the Parliament in late 2017 and early 2018. Concerns about political pressure also surrounded the delayed signature of the government's agreement with RTCG on the provision of public broadcasting services and the approval of the collective agreement regulating the work of its employees.

RTCG employs Programming Principles and Professional Standards of Public Broadcasters Radio of Montenegro and Television of Montenegro, available also in English. RTCG's programme principles and professional standards are published on its website. Article 10 of the Law obliges the broadcasters to adopt and follow these principles.

These programming principles have been sharply criticised by Parliament.

The head of RTCG Council believes that the programme principles should be fully implemented, while the changes of the Law about the National Broadcasting Service should include increasing authority of Agency for Electronic Media of Montenegro, as well as introduction of financial penalties for media organisations when violating the code.

According to Nevenka Cirovic, Vice President of the Trade Union of Media of Montenegro, only few journalists know the Program Principles and Standards. "We, being constantly exposed to various kinds of pressures, struggled to survive precisely by referring to these Principles, which is an extraordinary content and offers to the journalists of the Public Service excellent basis for ethical and professional journalism."

The problem is implementation and lack of training. She said there is a need to refer more to these Programming principles and standards. *Then we would have much more significant results and the transition would not last as long.*

The Trade Union of Media of Montenegro underlines the need of the fully functioning Complaints Commission with the RTCG Council and supports all the activities. Journalists do not have any formal mechanism that would help protect them from undue interference. The only possibility is to write to the RTCG Council, but their reaction depends on their interest in the case, the will of the members to be interested in the case and put it on the agenda.

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Only the RTCG Statute¹⁰¹ stipulates that journalists and programme editors shall have the independence and autonomy of work... and that it is forbidden to dismiss them... or deteriorate their position in any other way because of the expressed opinion that is in compliance with the programme conception and journalist code. The Statute does not explicitly state that journalists are separated and independent of the marketing sector or advertisers' influence. Formally, journalists and editors are independent, but there is a prevailing opinion that it is not true and that they are influenced by the director general and political structures.

Also the recent report by JUFREX on Montenegro Media Sector Inquiry with Recommendations for Harmonisation with the Council of Europe and European Union standards, published in December 2017 describes the political influence.¹² For instance, the interviewees argue, when the ruling party held a majority of the Council seats, the impact of such dominance was felt in the selection of news items discussed and people interviewed, as well as in the tone and perspective adopted. The RTCG was generally deemed actively pro-government.

The current management team, together with the members of the RTCG Council, has expressed strong commitment to keep distance from all political parties and state institutions and to serve only the interests of the citizens. They stated that "at present, politicians do not call neither the journalists nor the management team of the public broadcaster" (ibid.). However, due to the political influence exerted over the years, it is still very difficult to transform the internal organisational culture. RTCG now also claims to have news and political debates that are more open, objective and balanced, but is facing accusations of supporting dissident voices. The current government has indeed drastically changed their perspective on RTCG. A high-ranking government official in an interview acknowledged and regretted that the opposition steered the majority of the Council, causing, in his eyes, deterioration of professionalism.

In the end of November 2017, the Ministry of European Affairs, with the consent of the European Commission, published the Non-paper of the European Commission on the state of play in Chapters 233 and 24 (EC 2017), which contains comprehensive information regarding the process of accession of Montenegro to the EU in 2017. In the part related to freedom of expression it is emphasised that "the RTCG management and its governing bodies need to be shielded from undue influence and political pressure". Also, the document states that "editorial independence and professionalism standards need to be further enhanced" in the RTCG.

A journalist working at RTCG said that he faced obstruction by the management and was forbidden to work. Therefore, he invoked the Statute provisions which guarantee the

¹² https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eng_jufrex_mne_mi_final_report.pdf

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independence and addressed the Council but did not receive adequate protection. His salary was reduced on several occasions and he was prevented from working in the news programmes. “Then, the director general told me I had no right to work in the PBS as an independent journalist and if I wanted to do so, then I should open my own media outlet. I asked for a mechanism to protect myself by using the Statute and they failed to find a way to solve the problem through the institution. They told me that we should reconcile.”¹³

Recommendations:

The new government promised to refrain from influencing psm in Montenegro, but several issues need to be tackled before editorial independence can be guaranteed:

- While the content of the Programming Principles and Professional Standards is appreciated, there is a great need for journalists to know the code and be able to use it;
- need for training and need for an improved complaints mechanism;
- Program principles and standards, along with the Code of Journalists and Laws on the Media, Electronic Media and Public Services of the Radio and Television of Montenegro, should be the subject of continuous education of the Public Service Journalists. And this should start in RTCG, regardless of the work experience;
- All employed journalists, and editors, through an organized and systematic model of training, should be constantly in the process of getting acquainted with the mechanisms available to them as a protection against censorship and self-censorship.

6. Serbia:

Radio Television of Serbia and Radio-television of Vojvodina, the two public service media in Serbia do not have separate codes on ethical principles of reporting. There are general codes, but they are valid for all employees. Radio Television of Vojvodina has a journalists’ code, which is essentially a code of conduct. However, this Code does not contain journalistic principles of reporting. Radio Television of Serbia had a draft Code, but has never completed or adopted it. The Articles of Association of these two public broadcasting services stipulate that the editor-in-chief cannot be a holder of a public function or a function in a political party. Editors are also formally independent in their work; however, in practice this is not the case.

¹³ <http://safejournalists.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/WB-Media-Freedom-Indicators-2016-ENG-full-report.pdf>

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RTS does not have its own editorial and ethical code in the integral form, but some of the provision and guidelines exist within the three media-related laws which entered into force in August 2014: the Law on Public Information and Media, the Law on Electronic Media, and the Law on Public Media Service, as well as in the statute of RTS.

In Serbia, pressures on public broadcasting services are frequent and come from different directions. Public officials frequently criticise the work of public broadcasting services, thus exerting pressure. A journalist interviewed for the purpose of the research conducted by the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS) emphasised that even though such pressures are not direct, they may seriously jeopardise the profession of journalism. The report mentions pressures on Radio Television of Vojvodina – in March 2016 the Managing board of RTV performed, in the opinion of professional public, unlawful replacement of the manager and programme editors. Replacements and contract terminations started following the 2016 elections and changes in the authorities in Vojvodina, when Democratic Party lost to the coalition headed by Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).¹⁴

Institutional autonomy and editorial independence of public broadcasters in Serbia are guaranteed by the Law on Public Media Services. Most journalists and media experts say that institutional autonomy and editorial independence are formally guaranteed, but that in practice it is not possible to talk about independence. According to some journalists, the influence of political parties on the work of public services is evident, primarily in their news programmes. One of the surveyed journalists said that the point of journalism is to investigate societal anomalies and try to rectify them by publishing them so as to enable progress in society. However, practices of public broadcasters comprise mere transfer of information, press releases, and positions, almost without any critical overview of the topic. On the other hand, a journalist from Radio Television Serbia (RTS) says:

“In everyday work there is independence, it is not as if we have to go somewhere for an opinion or ask some- one for an authorisation. We are not prohibited to do anything or told what we may and what we may not do. Still, on the other hand, there are pressures and expectations from all stakeholders, authorities, opposition, even citizens. Financing is the problem, and as long as public services are nuanced in this manner, they will be susceptible to pressures and various influences.”¹⁵

When it comes to editorial policy in news and current affairs, the broadcaster is being widely perceived as “a state television” and often accused as a “voice of the government”, a media outlet with no place for opposing views or any criticism against authorities¹⁶.

¹⁴ See report on Serbia: Indicators of the level of media freedom and journalists' freedom, 2017

¹⁵ Zoran Stanojević, journalist from Radio Television of Serbia, interviewed by Marija Vukasović on 5 June 2017

¹⁶ Inception Project Mission report

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Both PSMs in Serbia have formal rules to keep the newsrooms separate and independent from management, but they are not respected in practice. There are indirect forms of pressure (through the management bodies).

There is no complaints mechanism, since RTS has no body in charge for complaints within the organization. The only institution in Serbia that can be addressed with the complaints about the program of RTS is the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media.

The Journalists Union of Serbia believes that an ethical code for RTS can be drafted and finalized soon, in cooperation with the European Federation of Journalists. Some of RTS news editors have already been working on a code of behaviour of RTS media staff on social media.

Recommendations:

Given the fact that the biggest broadcaster in the region has not yet their own specific codes and there are many indirect forms of pressure both internally and externally, it is high time:

- To either draft a code in line with the Albanian or Croatian Code of Ethics or adopt a general code which protects all members of editorial staff throughout Serbian media from undue political interference;
- To implement the existing formal rules separating newsroom from management;
- To provide training for all journalists working at RTS;
- To create an efficient complaints mechanism within RTS.

Conclusions

With reference to all different developments in the six Balkan countries, let me start positively: The recent experience of drafting editorial guidelines for Albania with support of International and regional stakeholders is promising. The content of the preamble should be an imperative for all PSM: “.these editorial principles arise not only as a need and necessity, but also as the fulfilment of an obligation to ensure transparency, impartiality, fairness, accountability, balance, truthfulness, credibility, accuracy, creativity and high standards in all of our products”

These editorial principles are indeed a very good piece of reference, but will only protect and fulfil its mission when known to the journalists, when implemented accordingly and when the (political) will persists to get it widely recognised. For this, training is of utmost importance, but also respect for its principles by all stakeholders.

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They could be a reference for Serbia, which yet needs to establish if possible one ethical code, and Bosnia & Herzegovina which needs an urgent update.

Experiences from the region show that editors in public service media often become an extended arm of politicians and various interest groups – instead to be protectors of the journalistic profession and public interest, so there is a need to include them in any code of conduct.

I would like to insist by referring to a checklist for editorial independence adopted by IFJ in Zagreb back in 1999 that the management of the public service broadcasters must protect journalists from interference from outside interests be they political or economic. Managers and editors-in-chief of public service broadcasters cannot receive any mandate or take instructions from any person or body whatsoever from outside the public service broadcasting organisation. They must exercise their functions strictly in the interests of the public service broadcasting organisation which they represent and manage.¹⁷

All the challenges described by journalists, editors and management when it comes to the crucial issue of editorial independence and finding tools against self-censorship, censorship and any undue economic or political interference must be seen with reference to transition governments. Implementation, training, awareness raising and a cultural change are urgently needed to make PSM in the Western Balkan a real cornerstone of diversity, pluralism and quality media. This project can give an important impetus in advancing on these sensitive issues given the financial sustainability and political will to support PSM.

¹⁷ See <http://www.ifj.org/nc/news-single-view/browse/10/backpid/59/article/a-checklist-for-editorial-independence-in-broadcasting/> Zagreb, 1999

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