

REPORT

**RESEARCHING MEDIA FREEDOMS IN
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA IN 2019**

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1. INTRODUCTION

This research on media freedoms according to citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina was conducted in the period 27 March to 8 April 2019, on a representative sample of households enclosed by a random selection of fix lines phone numbers, by CATI method (Computer Assisted Telephone Interview). The research enclosed a total of 506 polled persons, 319 of which were from the Federation BiH and 187 were from the Republic of Srpska. The surveyors spoke to the person who had the most recent birthday in the household and was over 18.

2. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

2.1 RESULT SUMMARY

Results of this year's research, compared to previous annual researches show several very worrying trends in the mood of BiH citizens towards the media and journalists. Although the noticed phenomena, according to research results, are not significantly important in the quantitative sense in relation to a few years averages, the trends, however, show a serious turn in the mood of citizens towards journalists and media regarding some key questions. Most prominently, the trend of decreasing trust in media and journalists continued, so this year it happened for the first time there was more people who do not believe in media than those who do, both in the Federation BiH and the Republic of Srpska. More and more citizens are inclined to blame the journalists themselves for the frequent attacks on them and the profession itself, while there is a growing concern about journalists' professionalism.

If we compare the data with similar researches in other countries in the region, there is still high level of trust in media and journalists as well as high level of distrust in politicians and political parties, which the citizens consider most responsible for the bad position of journalists and media freedoms.

2.2 CONFIDENCE IN INSTITUTIONS

Religious communities are the most trusted institutions in BiH in 2019 – according to the research results, as much as 74% of citizens have confidence in religious communities. Media are still high on the list, but the trust in them fell from last year's 77% to 66% in 2019. Although relatively high for the region where BiH is situated – in Croatia the media are trusted by only 39% of citizens¹ - the trust in the work of media in Bosnia and Herzegovina is in a decreasing

¹ Research conducted by Reuters Institute and Oxford University for 2018, taken from <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2018/croatia-2018/>

trend for last several years, falling from over 80% of support of some years ago. From this year's research trends that deserve to be mentioned, we would put as first the dramatical fall of confidence in the work of the NGO sector institutions – from 72% in 2018 to only 44% a year later. In the same period the trust in the institutions of power jumped from 34% to 48%, which is the highest registered value over the past five years. Political parties and politicians that reached the bottom in the 2017 research with 12% support, continue to recover and in 2019 they reached 27% for the parties and 26% for the politicians. The International community is at 48% of support.

2.3 ATTITUDES ABOUT MEDIA AND MEDIA FREEDOMS

Though the general level of confidence in the work of media in 2018 research was about equal on entity level, this year there are significant discrepancies. A total of 53% of BiH citizens trust the media from the area of Federation BiH, while 44% of citizens do not trust them. In the Federation BiH, though, the number of partly and fully satisfied with the work of media in that entity decreased to 64% and the number of partly and fully dissatisfied increased to 35%, the turn in the Republic of Srpska was even more prominent, with the ration of 35% fully and partly satisfied and 60% of fully and partly dissatisfied with the work of the media in the Federation BiH. It may be assessed that in the Republic of Srpska there has been a dramatical decrease of trust in media from the other entity – only a year ago work of the media was supported by 69% of citizens, while 27% were against.

At the same time, the level of confidence in the work of media in Republic of Srpska is also falling. In the absolute figures for the whole Bosnia and Herzegovina, 44% of citizens trust the media from the Republic of Srpska, while a bit more, 48%, do not have trust in them. The number of partly or fully satisfied citizens of Republic of Srpska with media in their entity decreased from high 75% last year to 60% now, while the number of partly or fully satisfied increased from 24% to 39%. Both these figures are in compliance with the continual trend of decreasing trust in media, as well as in all other institutions, which is prevailing in the last several years, after a raise noticed when the research started ten years ago. Among the Federation BiH citizens, only 34% are partly or fully satisfied with the work of media in the Republic of Srpska, which is a continuous downfall from the highest level of 60% of 2017. Partly and fully dissatisfied are 54%.

All in all, speaking of satisfaction with the work of media at the level of the whole Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the level of the two entities, regardless whether the people were referring to media in their or the other entity, the satisfaction with the work of media and journalists notably decreased compared to last year in any combination of polled subjects and entity of residence. It is worth mentioning that the largest decrease is with RS citizens towards the FBiH media – by 35%. The citizens of Republic of Srpska and Federation BiH are practically equal in their satisfaction with media and journalists from the entity that is not their domicile one – 35% and 34%. These figures could be significant for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state.

Speaking of freedom of media, most people do not believe it exists in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Differences between the entities are not significant, but it is interesting to note that citizens see larger freedom of media in the other entity, compared to theirs. Hence, 80% of BiH citizens believe that freedom of media is not at all present, or is just partially present, in the Federation BiH – the result in FBiH was 81%, while in the RS this position is shared by 79% of people. Freedom of media in the Republic of Srpska is not seen by 82% of BiH citizens – 89% from the RS and 78% from Federation BiH.

It is worth mentioning that in 2009, only 24% of BiH citizens believed there were no media freedoms in Federation BiH, while 45% thought the same about Republic of Srpska.

Speaking of obstacles to free work of media, the dominant opinion is still that there is an interdependence between politics, media and journalists – that number is increasing and this year it reached the peak of 55%. There was a strong increase in number of those who see journalists' unprofessionalism as an obstacle to free work of media – now they share second place with financial dependence, each with 32% of people who share those positions. In the previous years journalists' unprofessionalism was in the lower part of the ladder, mainly in the range of 10% to 20%. This year, again, a number of polled subjects, 21% of them, criticized the inadequate legislative frame – last year there were only 4%, but a year before that, 36%! No significant discrepancies in opinions of Federation BiH citizens and Republic of Srpska citizens about these topics, so this year they are in the range of few percentages to complete match.

2.3 INFLUENCES TO THE WORK OF MEDIA

The most important influence to the work of media continue to be politicians and political parties, as usual, with a big difference to the next category, media owners and editors. With 64% compared to 20%, the difference is 44%, although in the past years it used to go up to 60%. Influential businessmen are considered less influential with 9% of the polled who put them on the first place, while the OHR and the international community are seen as factor of influence by only 3% of the polled subjects. There are no significant discrepancies here as well between the polled from the two entities.

2.5 VIOLATIONS OF JOURNALISTS' RIGHTS AND MEDIA FREEDOMS

Just as with the assessment of influence, with the violations of journalists' rights and freedoms the BiH citizens see, first and foremost, politicians and political parties with 55%, followed by media owners and editors with 23%, and influential businessmen with 12%. At the bottom of list there are advertisers and sponsors with 4%, OHR and the International community with 3%, and religious communities with 1%. Speaking of discrepancies at the entity level, in the Federation BiH people are more inclined to blame politicians and political parties (56% to 52%), while in the Republic of Srpska they comparatively more put the blame on the OHR and the International community (2% to 5%), but, in the end, there are no significant differences.

Change of attitude towards assaults on journalists is deeply concerning. Less and less polled subjects find them unjustified, 79% of them. That number particularly decreased in the Republic of Srpska – only 73% of people there think attacks on journalists are unjustified, while in the Federation BiH there are 83% of people who share that opinion. It is a significant turn compared to last year, when, after years of increasing, the share of those who do not accept attacks on journalists grew to 94%.

There is a growing trend of those who consider attacks on journalists justified. It is shocking to see that more than a fifth of polled, 21% of them, justify attacks on journalists. In the Federation BiH there are 17% of those who believe so, while in the Republic of Srpska there are as much as 27% of polled who share that position.

Number of those who find journalists politically motivated also increased – there are 86% of them in Bosnia and Herzegovina now, 14% more than before. Only 12% of BiH citizens today

think that journalists are not politically motivated – last year there were 28% of them with that attitude.

2.6 MOTIVATION OF JOURNALISTS AND SELECTION OF TOPICS

Reaction of polled subjects to the selection of topics the journalists report about could, perhaps, be best described as mild – exactly half of the polled believe the topics were well selected, i.e. that they cover some of citizens' main concerns, but there are a lot of other topics that should be tackled. Among other answers to related questions, 23% of polled support the selection of journalists' topics, while 27% believe that journalists do not deal with topics interesting for the citizens at all. The ratios differ to a certain degree between the Federation BiH and the Republic of Srpska, but it is interesting to note that the same percentage, 27% of people, consider the selection of journalists topics bad.

Citizens would generally wish to see more topics in the media about health (51%), everyday life (50%) and education (48%). There followed economical topics, social topics, miscellaneous topics and religious topics with 25%, while crime and corruption get 21% and political themes only 4% of votes of the polled. It would be very interesting to compare this part of the research with results of clicks and reading articles on online portals with news, where the columns of most read articles usually show quite the opposite.

2.7 POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS AND QUALITY OF MEDIA INFORMATION

There was also a turn in the segment about possible improvement of journalists' work and quality of reporting, complied, in a matter of speaking, with other negative turns towards journalists and journalism in this year's research. Majority of polled subjects, 51% of them (the RS leads with 58%), put on the first place sharpening of criteria for journalist profession, while last year this was the fourth desired way of improving the quality. Also, 51% of the polled advocates advance of education system of journalists (last year it was on third place). There followed improvement of material and financial conditions for journalists, which was the least represented answer last year – it is possible to speculate that a certain number of citizens starts to think the influence of poor financial status of journalists to their inclination to bribery. Only after these there followed securing better application of law on protecting the journalists' rights, which was no.1 answer last year.

When it comes to the quality of the media, the weakest position is with the radio, which is put on the 1st place only by 5% of the polled. It is interesting to compare it with the situation in the neighboring Croatia, where radio is the most trusted media.² A bit more of the polled appreciated the quality of reporting in the daily papers, while 43% of them trusts Internet and 44% the TV. For the sake of comparison, in North European countries, citizens' trust in radio is between 80% and 90%, while it is a bit less to printed media, while Internet is significantly less trusted and especially the social networks.³

2.8 EVALUATION OF INFLUENCE OF MEDIA AND THEIR WORK

Internet is considered as important, or important for the public and citizens by 73% of the polled. A vast majority admits internet's role in democratization of communication and enabling pluralism of opinions (75%), but at the same time 59% does not feel as being informed with more quality due to high increase in number of internet portals and publicly accessible information. Also, 79% of the polled agreed that with the increase of number of media contents over the last years, there was an increase of publicly represented different opinions on social and political circumstances. However, 78% of the polled believed that media contributed to strengthening religious and national tensions between the BiH entities.

Loss of objectivity due to political motifs 82% of the polled attributed to journalists, while 83% of them saw large presence of political influence on the media. Media are criticized to have too many negative information and pessimism by 78% of the polled, while 88% believe that journalists should stick more to the ethical principles.

2.9 WORK OF PUBLIC MEDIA SERVICES

Speaking of public media services, some 81% of the polled saw large political influence that is reflected in appointing directors and editors (78%), creating and editing news (77%) and editing political shows and magazines (79%).

It is indicative that the polled people supported the selection of editors and directors of public media services based on knowledge and experience in journalism (86%) or professional

² Radio was marked with highest average mark of 2,92 on the scale from 1 to 5 in the research by 'Pilarov barometar hrvatskog društva' of 2016, taken from <http://barometar.pilar.hr/rezultati-2016/mediji/povjerenje.html>

³ Research Fake News and Disinformation Online 2018, taken from <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-results-eurobarometer-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>

expertise (81%), while there was a very poor support to selection based on ethnicity (16%) and even less based on political support (only 14%).

Majority of the polled, 63% of them, would cancel the RTV tax and all other forms of financing public media services from the budget. Some 35% of the polled supports various forms of changing the model of collecting the RTV tax, while only 1% was in favor of increasing the amount of RTV tax.

Why is there such a great resistance to paying public media services might be discovered by the following positions. As much as 65% of the polled believed that public media services are not transparent in their work, they do not inform the citizens enough about their program and financial results, and other achievements. Even more, 68% of the polled, wanted to have publicly available reports on financial business and spending citizens' money by the media services on the web, while 57% believed that the expert public, NGO sector, academic and religious communities should have more influence on selection of programmatic and managing board members in public media services.

3. CONCLUSION

The BiH citizens obviously think carefully about their opinions regarding media. Newer data on attitudes towards public media services are probably the best indicator of that – the polled subjects knew exactly what they wanted, more transparency in work and less political influence. Until it is transparent where the money paid to media services is going and until key issues are decided by experts, proven and politically independent men selected in consensus with the community, people would prefer not to spend their money on three public media services in BiH.

It is interesting to see how the people simultaneously perceive internet as strengthening the plurality in a public sphere, but also elevating tensions among religious, national and political groups. They are very well aware of the high influence of politics in the BiH media sphere, but they also see the grass as greener on the other side, i.e. that the media are a bit more free in the other entity.

Speaking of negative trends, it is important to stress the decrease of trust in journalists and media, increase of doubts in their professionalism and increasing justification of attacks on journalists. There were quite a few media affairs and conflicts since the last research in BiH, while mostly the biggest was the case of murdered David Dragicevic in Banja Luka (it is clear that negative trends are stronger in the Republic of Srpska).

In the near future, the utmost importance is for the journalism to defend its honor and prove to be independent from political and other pressures more than the present perception of citizens appears to be. There are some mild indications in this year's report that show that further raise of trust in plurality of opinion on the internet might open up a space for that.

Prepared by: Bozo Skoko, PhD, and Marko Cusic