

Freedom in institutional and social limbo

INTRO

CIVIL - Center for Freedom has implemented From Understanding to Protection - project for understanding and protection of freedom of expression and media freedoms in the Republic of Macedonia, aimed at promotion of freedom of expression, media freedoms and civic engagement in the Republic of Macedonia.

Through research, analysis and recommendations for action to improve the areas of freedom of expression, media

freedoms and civic participation, the project has continually published media content about the situation in these areas and contributes to understanding the issues relevant to this project and the issues that arise from them.

The project coincides with the long-term program and strategic efforts of CIVIL to advocate, promote and protect freedom of expression and media freedoms in the Republic of Macedonia and beyond.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE OF CIVIL

Freedom of expression and media freedoms are one of the major strategic and statutory commitments of the organization, and are crosscutting issues in all other strategic and programmatic activities.

Short selection of publications dedicated or including these issues:

"Cure" (2010), "Journalism Handbook" (2011), "Unscrupulous Struggle for Power" (2013), "Speak Up" (2014), "Democracy Disqualified" (2014), "Free Elections: Non-Negotiable

Condition" (2016), "Elections 2016" (2017), "Free Elections: Lessons Learned" (2018).

From Understanding to Protection project represents a continuity of CIVIL's work in this field. During the implementation of the project, the CIVIL team conducted field activities on a daily basis, including civic education on media literacy and field research.

These activities have been basis for rich media content that may serve as basis for

media literacy education and further reading for researchers and experts. Project outputs and analysis have provided basis for recommendations that have the capacity to greatly contribute towards creation of an

environment for truly consistent protection of freedom of expression and media freedoms, including journalists' safety and respect for their professional integrity.

SUPPORT AND PARTNERSHIPS

This project is funded by the European Union through the small grants programme "Protecting Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression in the Western Balkans" implemented by the Croatian Journalists' Association as part of the regional project Western Balkan's Regional Platform for Advocating Media Freedom and Journalists' Safety, carried out through partnership of six regional journalists' associations – Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS), Association of BH Journalists (BHJ), Croatian Journalists' Association (CJA),

Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AJK), Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) and the Trade Union of Media of Montenegro (TUMM).

CIVIL has implemented this project in partnership with the informal group initiative No To Censorship, composed of journalists who advocate for media freedoms and which is in close cooperation with CIVIL Media, an organizational unit of CIVIL - Center for Freedom.

INTERVIEWS

CIVIL has conducted over 60 interviews with four categories of interlocutors throughout Macedonia:

1. Media owners;
2. Editors and chief editors;
3. Journalists, local correspondents;
4. Civil society, activists and citizen journalists.

The selected representatives of the above listed categories have responded to the following questions:

- What is their understanding of freedom of expression, media freedoms and activism?
- How do they support the needs for freedom of expression, media freedoms and activism?
- Do they face pressure from political and business centers of power, and how do they deal with them?
- What are their recommendations for protection of freedom of expression, media freedoms and human rights?

STREET ENQUIRIES

Parallel to the interviews, as part of the research component of the project, CIVIL has interviewed well over 200 random citizens in Skopje, Strumica, Bitola, Prilep, Tetovo,

Kumanovo, Shtip and other cities throughout the country. They answered questions about whether there is freedom of expression and how free the media are.

OPTION: ANONYMITY

The project offered an option of providing answers in anonymous form, but that option was minimally used. In the case of interviewed interlocutors, they had neither fear nor any limitation to speak in front of a camera about topics set by us.

However, the refusal to speak about 20 media representatives at all is symptomatic.

The refusal of the citizens on the streets in the cities throughout Macedonia was also noted by CIVIL teams.

FINDINGS / ANALYSIS

It is important to point out that From Understanding to Protection project was implemented in a time critical for freedom of expression and media freedom (October 2017 - March 2018). It is a period when many weaknesses of the institutions, but also of society were manifested, with the insufficiently decisive transition of power and the slow transformation from a captured into a free society. The project ends in a time that can be marked as an institutional and social limbo in which the needs and hopes are stuck and contrasted, on the one hand, and the anxious reality of the situation, inertia and old habits on the other.

These contrasts and anxiety were expressed by some of the journalists and civil society representatives, particularly in the off-the-record communication with CIVIL teams.

CIVIL has recorded a widespread opinion that, after the fall of corrupt and autocratic Gruevski-led government, as a result of the early parliamentary elections (December 2016), pressure on institutions, society, and media has significantly decreased. Still, democratization process has faced fierce resistance by the anti-democratic power centers, instability, and a violent attack on the Parliament on April 27, 2017, during the

attempt of lawful and constitutional process of transition of power.

One of the conclusions of the analysts and researchers with CIVIL and the N2C is that soon after the fall of the previous government, the development in the media sphere did not meet the expectations of both the public and the journalists. Simply, the "sunflower effect" took place. Most of the media played an insatiable role and remained "faithful" to the "once pro-government - always pro-government" principle. According to our interlocutors among the civil society and the citizens, media remained in their clientelism mode.

During that time, the status of journalists had not changed much. Although the "breath of freedom" can be generally felt and the intensity of negative trends have subsided, the pressures, blackmail, verbal and physical attacks have, nevertheless, remained. Additionally, a serious problem is that incomes of journalists remained rather low, which continues to be one of the tools for manipulation and pressure on them.

CIVIL's interlocutors within all categories testified for a number of pressures during the reign of the previous government, but many of them speak of subtle and not so subtle pressures in the aftermath. The pressure from institutions, such as police, financial police and public revenue inspections have diminished. These institutions do not serve as a tool for political pressure and control of the media, anymore.

CIVIL's analysts conclude that editors and media owners, as well as journalists, to a

certain extent, know very little and even show no interest in civil society to which they, per definition, belong. Activism and citizen participation are far from being understood in their full dimension and importance. Moreover, it is perceived as a difficult if not impossible state of political culture and practice. On the other side, civil society representatives also manifest certain lack of media literacy and understanding of how media work.

There are media owners and editors who have excellent knowledge and are open to contribute towards elevation of political culture and development of democracy. From speaking to them, we conclude that media have the capacity, but they are also called upon to contribute to the strengthening of freedom of expression, media freedoms and activism.

"We are journalists. This is our basic profession. And the best way to do it is to practice it the only way to do it, that is, to support the freedom of expression. For us, this means a daily struggle and everyday challenge, because freedom is not given, it is taken, and therefore the battle for its conquest begins for us every morning, when we come to the editorial meetings and when we try to produce a newspaper, the contents of websites, or other kind of product" - said Branko Geroski, owner and chief editor of "Plusfino" news web portal and editor/co-owner of "Sloboden pecat" (Free Press) daily newspaper.

The interviews, as part of the project, represent a testimony for an in-depth knowledge of specific socio-political categories, as well as of policies and practices in the country. They are an outstanding online guideline for the new generations in the media and civil society, but also for improving the media literacy of citizens in general.

Censorship and self-censorship are arch-enemies of freedom of expression. Tolerance to the mistakes and corruptive attitude of the representatives of the government, whatever positions they may be, is part of such tendencies.

"I do not think that every mistake of the new government should be forgiven or not discussed at all costs, just so that VMRO does not return. The ultimate goal is to keep everyone under public scrutiny. The ultimate goal is to represent the values we fought for" - said actress and Colorful Revolution activist Simona Spirovska.

A number of recommendations were drawn from interviews with experts, editors, journalists and representatives of civil society. They are perhaps the most important segment that will provide the long-term effect of this project. In large part, these are recommendations that CIVIL has been voicing for years, but also recommendations that follow the new conditions and circumstances in this sphere.

"The standard journalism schools can no longer respond to the challenges of the new

times. The new professionals should be multi-tasking, and their education and training should involve interdisciplinary curriculum. They should be open to all the experiences of the new technologies, and thus the new types of public. New generations have different understandings of what is affordability, privacy, an opportunity to place ideas, where to look for markets, etc." - said university professor of communications and journalism, and the prominent political analyst Dr. Saso Ordanoski, formerly media owner and chief editor.

In the area of social justice and workers' rights of the journalists, CIVIL has collected several anonymous statements from all project locations, testifying that payments are poor, and often journalists are not fully employed. They also are demanded to return some parts of their honorariums to the owners. This coincides with findings of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM), publicly stated at the closing event of the project on March 14, 2018, by Dragan Sekulovski, the Director Executive of AJM.

The interviewed citizens, meanwhile, are far more pessimistic than all other categories of participants to the project. The general impression is that people do not trust media and feel that there is no freedom of expression. Many of the interviewees do not understand, or only partially understand what freedom of expression is. At least a quarter of the respondents refuse to speak in front of a camera, but quite openly and critically speak in an informal contact with CIVIL

representatives. They testify to the still-present fear of repercussions due to a publicly expressed attitude.

"The media, everything they say, is a lie" - says one citizen in front of CIVIL Media's camera. No matter how exaggerated this statement is, it coincides with a large number of responses in documented (formal and informal) communication with different categories covered by the project.

The proportion of citizens (25%) who refuse to speak on the record corresponds with the proportion of journalists, editors and media owners who did not agree to give an on the record statement for CIVIL.

Complex and fundamental changes in policies and practices must be implemented to strengthen freedom of expression, media freedoms and civic participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CIVIL has put its experience and results from the research together and provided the public with the following recommendations:

1. The impunity of those who in any way jeopardize freedom of expression, media freedoms, and safety of journalists must cease.

2. The public service (Macedonian Radio and Television) must finally return to the public, and all those responsible for the erosion of media freedoms must face legal consequences.

3. The independence of the media regulatory body (AVMS) must be

strengthened, and the bodies for media self-regulation should receive adequate support from the institutions of the state, free from conditioning and corruptive practices.

4. Political parties, institutions at local and national level and businesses must respect freedom of expression and media freedoms, in accordance to the constitutional, legislative and international norms and standards.

5. Legislation must be harmonized with the needs of the media by self-regulation. Laws that regulate the media sphere must be in line with the time and needs of the citizens, and not

of the power centers, that is, they must be socially responsible and genuine articulators of the public interest.

6. Financial independence of the media is a condition for media freedoms, but also for freedom of expression as a whole. The correlative influence of political and business power centers should be identified and prevented by legal measures and maximum respect for professional ethics.

7. An enabling environment in a society must be created in which freedom of expression, media freedoms and active citizenship are treated as resources of the society and state for democratic development and the rule of law, and not as hostile attacks.

8. Care must be taken for education and training to improve the skills of journalists that will be in line with new technologies and new global trends in media.

9. The past period has seen improvement in the domain of cooperation between civil society and the media, but this is far from being at the required level. There is a lot of unused space for substantial and comprehensive co-operation between

the two sectors, especially if we take into account global trends in this area.

10. Directing the donor community to the essential needs of the media for de-politicization, professionalization and independent work.

We encourage local and national government institutions, business community, media owners, editors, civil society, academia, and other stakeholders to consider these recommendations for further development and adoption.