

THE MEDIA IN MACEDONIA

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On World Press Freedom Day, about 200 journalists met in the Macedonian capital of Skopje in May 2009 to protest against unfair trials of journalists and pillory political pressure and the level of press freedom in general. To be sure, Macedonia's constitution guarantees freedom of opinion and the press. Moreover, laws such as the electronic media act of 2005 and the radio act do allow a certain latitude for journalists. Yet problems remain: many media depend on the state, wages are low, journalist training is defective, and outrages against reporters are still happening.

Macedonia's secession from ex-Yugoslavia in 1991 did not bring domestic unity. One enduring problem is the tension between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority. The armed conflict between the army and Albanian separatists was resolved only by the Ochrid agreement (OFA). Today, the country is a parliamentary democracy endeavouring to join the EU and NATO. Yet the Atlantic Alliance did not issue an invitation to the 2008 Bucharest summit, probably because of the ethnic tension and persistent corruption in the country and the unresolved dispute with Greece over the name Macedonia.

Headed by Nikola Gruevski, the coalition of civil and Albanian forces that currently governs the country continues to steer a course towards Europe, but it is confronted by great challenges: high unemployment, an extensive shadow economy, murky relations between politics and the economy, and the uneasy coexistence of ethnic groups. All this is echoed by the media of the country.

The total number of Macedonian print media can only be estimated; it is said that there are around 750. The most powerful newspaper group is the one owned by the Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ) which acquired three products called "Dnevnik", "Utrinski vestnik" and "Vest" in May 2003. Founded in 1996, Dnevnik boasts the highest circulation. The paper itself states that it is printing 55,000 copies a day, having broken the monopoly of the former 'state paper' "Nova Makedonija". Good style and up-to-date coverage brought new readers. With a circulation of 30,000, "Vest" belongs to the yellow-press category. Printed in 8,000 copies, "Utrinski vestnik" mainly offers analyses and comments.

Even privatization could not prevent the fall of "Nova Makedonija", the mouthpiece of the communists before independence. These days, it is barely hanging on with a circulation of 3,000. The eponymous company also owns "Vecer" (circulation 3,000) and the Turkish-language "Birlik".

Established in Sofia in 2004, the immensely popular "Vreme" has meanwhile reached a circulation of 10,000, appearing also on Sundays under the name of "Nedelno vreme". "Fakti", the leading paper published in the Albanian language, appears also in the Kosovo. At the same time, two Kosovanlanguage papers are being published in Macedonia, "Koha Ditore" and "Lajme".

About 60 weeklies are being printed in Macedonia, of which many appear at irregular intervals and face great financial problems. However, all the country's print media stand in need of financial transparency. The considerable pressure exerted by the state on the media, mostly through paid advertisements, adversely affects the choice and quality of information. Moreover, the special advantages enjoyed by established houses make it even more difficult for new independent papers to enter the market.

In 1997, the Council for Electronic Media (CEM) was established to monitor radio and television channels, protect pluralism and the freedom of opinion, and safeguard the independence of all media. Although CEM members are nominated by renowned institutions, they are all appointed by parliament in the end, a procedure which Freedom House regards as problematic.

Currently, there are six media institutes that hold broadcasting licences: MTV, a public-service channel, A1 TV, Alsat-M, Kanal 5, Sitel, and Telma. A1 TV, the market leader that was launched in 1993 as Macedonia's first private channel, attracted 23.7 percent of the viewing public in 2007. Next in line at 12.3 percent is Sitel, which has been mainly airing entertainment programmes since 1993. Kanal 5 has a market share of 7.6 percent, while Telma has 3.9. Launched in 2006, Alsat-M airs programmes in the Albanian language, swiftly winning over 86 percent of the country's Albanian population. At 52, the number of TV stations is high for a small country like Macedonia, although the funding question remains moot in many cases.

At a total of 62, radio stations are also fairly numerous, although only four of them hold a national licence. Because of the growing importance of television and, to an even greater extent, the internet, the number of listeners has been declining in recent years. On a regional and local scale, however, radio stations, two of which are transmitting Albanian-language programmes, still retain their importance.

Among the country's news agencies, Makfax has established itself as a reputable source. Founded in 1992, the agency also reports in Albanian and English. Makedonski Informativen Centar, another private agency, was established in 2007.

Founded in 1992 on the initiative of parliament, Makedonska Informativna Agencija also offers trilingual service. Portal Total supplies business news

every day. Finally, the internet has become a major source of information thanks to the online editions of various papers and journals.

The charges made in May of this year appear justified. In the view of Freedom House, the media in Macedonia are only 'partially free'. Outrages are still being committed on journalists for whose protection associations have been founded, although these are ethnically divided and hardly cooperate at all. Thus, the Association of Journalists exists side by side with the Association of Albanian Journalists.

The associations will have their work cut out to protect their own members from physical or legal persecution and lay abuses before the public: in May 2006, for example, a court in Kumanova sentenced Mr Bozinovski, an investigative journalist, to three months' imprisonment for libel and defamation after he had written an article exposing the links between politics, business, and journalism. Although Mr Bozinovski's article was written three years ago, and the libel clause on which the proceedings were based had been struck from the code days before the sentence, the court obviously wanted to finish the case under the 'old law'. The prisoner owes his premature release only to the pressure exerted by the EU and Amnesty International. Reports about attacks on Albanian journalists are piling up as well: in September 2007, for example, a reporter of the Albanian-language Alsat-M television channel had his camera forcibly torn from him when he filmed policemen who had aroused the rage of villagers by stopping the car of an MP who was involved in a parliamentary scandal. When he refused to hand over his camera, the journalist was knocked down by policemen.

The electronic media act adopted in 2005 was intended to protect pluralism from cartels. Thus, the owner of one electronic medium is not prohibited from acquiring an interest in another. What he may not do, however, is acquire an interest in a company which owns a print medium or is active in advertising, telecommunications, or the film industry. Once again, however, there is a gap between theory and practice, all the more so as many Macedonian TV channels belong to influential enterprises which, in turn, are closely related to political parties.

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