

## Macedonian Radio Television in Need of New Professional Standards

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### Introduction

The functions of public service broadcasting in the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM) are performed by the Macedonian Radio Television (MRT)<sup>1</sup> as stipulated in the Law on Audio- and Audio-Visual Media Services (LAAVMS). The Republic of North Macedonia is the founder of the MRT pursuant to the same Law and it operates as a public enterprise in accordance with the provision and conditions stipulated by law and the relevant implementing bylaws. According to applicable legislation the MRT is a public broadcasting service that operates independently of any government body, other public legal entities or business undertakings and must pursue an impartial editorial and business policy.

The MRT has the task of producing and broadcasting content in the fields of information, education, science, culture and art, documentary and feature programmes, and music and entertainment content in Macedonian and in the languages of other non-majority communities. The MRT is also required to produce content for people with disabilities and special needs (news and special programmes for viewers with impaired hearing). Through radio and TV satellite and/or via the internet, the MRT broadcasts 24-hour content that is available to viewers and listeners in Europe and beyond. The affirmation and nurturing of traditions, the spiritual and cultural heritage and values of all ethnic communities, as well as the preservation of the cultural and national identity are part of the essential mission of the MRT. The MRT is a highly atypical broadcasting service in Europe because its programmes are broadcast in nine different languages. Thus, in addition to Macedonian, the MRT produces content in Albanian, Turkish, Serbian, Roma, Vlach and Bosnian. In addition, the Macedonian Radio, which is part of the MRT, broadcasts programmes in Bulgarian and Greek.

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<sup>1</sup> The name is changed into National Broadcasting Service based on the Governmental decision from 05.03.2019.

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The MRT operates from its head office in Skopje and it has a modest network of correspondents that report from different areas in the country as well as a handful of foreign correspondents.

The responsibilities and obligations of the MRT are not stipulated in a separate law that refers exclusively to public service media but in the general broadcasting law, i.e. the Law on Audio- and Audio-Visual Media Services (LAAVMS), the MRT Statute and the Code of Ethics of the MRT. In accordance with the LAAVMS the general obligations of the MRT are to:

- › develop and broadcast programmes available to the general public in North Macedonia, in order to actively contribute to the creation and development of freedom of thought, inform the public and act as a driving force for the democratic process in the country. These programmes are intended for all groups in society without any discrimination, taking into account special groups;
- › provide continuous, accurate, complete, unbiased, fair and timely information by creating and broadcasting high-quality programmes on all political, economic, social, health related, cultural, entertaining, educational, scientific, religious, environmental, sporting and other events and developments in the RNM, Europe and in the world;
- › promote and improve the culture of public dialogue and serve as an arena for wide public debate on matters of public interest;

In addition, the MRT should protect public interest and not the interests of specific public bodies or political parties. On the other hand, it should also promote respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms.

An important role of the MRT envisaged by law is to develop programmes that nurture and improve the knowledge and understanding of the cultural identity of communities, promote respect for cultural and religious differences and for the culture of public dialogue with the aim of strengthening mutual understanding and tolerance and promoting good relations between communities in a multi-ethnic and multicultural environment.

### **History of public service media**

The first broadcasting service was the Macedonian radio, which hit the airwaves in 1944. This is considered the year in which the MRT was officially launched. The Macedonian television became part of the MRT 20 years later.

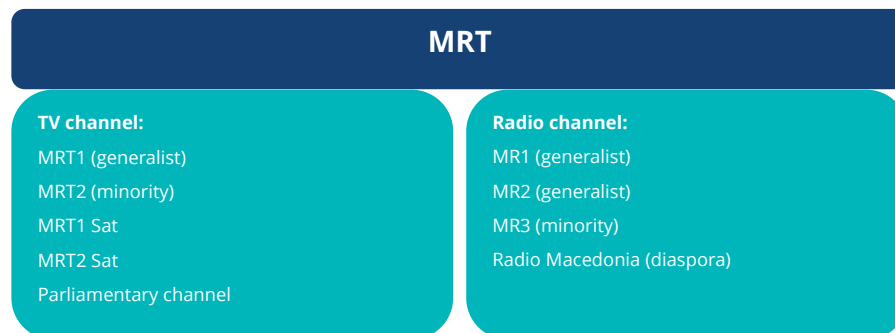
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According to archival records the birthday of the Skopje TV studio of the MRT is 14 December 1964. The regular programme was broadcast daily from 6.15 p.m. from the improvised studio with a live 20-minute broadcast of the daily news, followed by a children's animated cartoon, an educational show, foreign languages series, a cultural programme and commercials. This programme schedule was initially broadcast five days a week. A sufficient number of shows and newscasts were produced and broadcast within the schedule, with children's programmes and educational shows broadcast live until 8 p.m., followed by the joint programme of the Yugoslav Radio Television broadcast on the Skopje Radio Television channel.

At the start of 1971, the Macedonian television started broadcasting in colour. It is believed to be one of the pioneers of the technology in the Balkans. In the following years, the first domestic production of popular films commenced with content that remains popular to date.

In the following years, the infrastructure for broadcasting was developed and new content was introduced. Until 1991 the MRT was part of the Yugoslavian Radio Television and two years later it became a member of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU).

### Structure of the broadcasting system



The MRT currently operates two programme services: the first one, which broadcasts 24 hours in Macedonian, and the second, which broadcasts programmes intended for the ethnic communities. In addition, the MRT has a parliamentary and satellite channel. According to recent amendments to the law, the MRT should have one additional channel that broadcasts 24 hours

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in the language spoken by at least 20 percent of citizens other than those of Macedonian ethnicity. This provision has not been implemented to date.

The Parliamentary channel established under the Law on the Assembly of the RNM operates as a separate MRT service. The editorial responsibility for the Parliamentary channel rests with the MRT and the programme schedule is aligned with Parliamentary agenda in cooperation with the national Parliament.

The Macedonian radio comprises three programme services: The First and Second Programme, which broadcast 24 hours in Macedonian, and the Third Programme, which broadcasts in the languages of ethnic minorities. There is also a satellite channel called Radio Macedonia, which targets the Macedonian diaspora.

According to the MRT website the broadcaster currently has a total of 839 employees. However, this is at variance with the information published in the most recent financial report of MRT according to which the broadcaster has a total of 819 employees.

The Management of the MRT consists of:

1. the Programming Council of MRT;
2. the Supervisory Board of MRT; and
3. the Director-General and Deputy Director-General of the MRT.

The **MRT Programme Council** is currently composed of 13 members appointed by Parliament, acting on a proposal from the parties authorised to put forth nominations. These parties were expressly stipulated in the previous law.

In keeping with the amendments to the LAAVMS adopted on 31 December 2018, the model for the appointment of members of the Programme Council, which is the governing body of MRT, was modified in order to enhance its independence from political influence. Thus, organisations and institutions that could nominate Council members in the past are no longer able to do so. This power has been granted to organisations with a certain profile, which currently can recommend candidates who are eligible to apply in open competitions followed by a parliamentary vote that requires a 2/3 majority. This enables a wider circle of individuals to apply and ensures that the process is inclusive. However, if the selection of candidates is not transparent, the procedure may lead to the appointment of persons with strong political affiliations rather than representatives of authentic civil society organisations or higher education

institutions. A new feature of the model is that all candidates are granted a public hearing by Parliament. The new nominees are expected to be elected in September 2019.

In accordance with the LAAVMS the candidates for members of the MRT Programming Council must be citizens of North Macedonia who hold a university degree and have at least 8 years of proven professional and experience in areas such as communication, journalism, computer science, culture, economics or law.

The MRT Programming Council approves the appointment or dismissal of editors at the MRT. The Director-General of the MRT is obliged to request the consent of the Programming Council in order to adopt decisions on the appointment and dismissal of staff.

The Supervisory Board is the second most important body of the MRT, which monitors the administrative and financial operations of the broadcaster. It is composed of seven members elected by the MRT Programming Council on the basis of an open competition.

The Director-General and Deputy Director-General of the MRT play an equally important role within the organisation. They are selected by the MRT Programming Council on the basis of an open competition and appointed for a period of three years with an option for re-election.

### Share of the MRT

According to the media regulatory body in 2017 the national terrestrial television channels with the greatest viewing audience was TV Sitel with an average daily reach of 38.24 percent. TV Kanal 5, as in the previous year, was the second most watched TV channel with an average daily reach of 33.37 percent. The MRTV1 was ranked in the sixth place (last among the terrestrial TV stations with nationwide coverage, plus five private TV channels) in terms of viewing with an average daily reach of 12.63 percent and an average weekly reach of 19.68 percent. It is followed by the MTV2 and the Parliamentary channel. This means that during the year more than a third of the viewers followed one private TV channel with national coverage, in addition to the MRT with an audience reach that was three times lower.

The average daily reach is calculated as the ratio between the viewers who reported that they had watched a particular TV channel at any time during the

previous day and the total population, and the average weekly reach as a ratio between the people who reported to have watched a particular TV channel in any period during the previous week and the total population. The Macedonian public radio station was ranked third in terms of audience, falling behind the private stations Antenna 5 and Channel 77.

### Independence of broadcasting

Two important conditions safeguard the independence of the MRT. These are, firstly, an independent and sustainable financing model and, secondly, a management structure that is free from the influence of party actors or the business community.

**The MRT is in a poor financial state:** according to statistical data published by the Public Revenue Office, in recent years the MRT was one of the largest debtors in North Macedonia on account of its poor financial condition. Consequently, but also as a result of pressure from domestic media and journalist organisations as well as older organisations such as the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, along with the influence of the international community, the model for MRT funding was changed by enacting amendments to the LAAVMS. In the last almost two years, the broadcaster has been financed directly from the state budget by a fixed subsidy. In the past, with the main source of funding was the monthly licence fee of approximately 3 Euro per household.

Currently, the funds necessary to cover the cost of creating and broadcasting programme content and for technical and technological development are provided from the budget of the central government and stand at 0.8 percent to 1 percent of total revenue collected in the fiscal year preceding that for which the amount is determined. The funds are appropriated as follows:

- › 74.5 percent for the MRT,
- › 19.5 percent for Macedonian Broadcasting (separate entity) responsible for the maintenance and development of the public broadcasting network, and
- › 6 percent for the Agency for Audio and Audio-visual Media Services (media regulator).

According to the analysis of the market conducted by the media regulator in 2017 the MRT generated a total income of slightly more than 17 million Euro,

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including income from advertising of 400 000 Euro and other funds (mostly from public sources). The MRT thus had a total share of 40 percent of the whole media market in the country according to the estimates of the regulator.

The budget for 2018 is estimated to be even lower as the MRT received approximately 0.7 percent from the state budget. In 2019, following the amendments to the LAAVMS, the budget allocation will amount to 0.8 percent, gradually rising 0.9 percent in 2020 and 1 percent in 2021, averaging 25 million Euro per year.

However, the poor financial conditions in previous years have led to staff being underpaid and poorly motivated to perform their duties according to the regular surveys conducted among journalists by the Association of Journalists of Macedonia. In these surveys, journalists from the MRT have expressed the greatest dissatisfaction and this is also reflected in the level of their motivation to perform their daily work.

In addition to this, according to the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, MRT's network of correspondents is very poor and the broadcaster currently has less than eight reporters with insufficient equipment that occasionally report on topics of local interest. In the past, the MRT had regional centres with offices in different parts of North Macedonia. However, no substitute arrangements have been made and covering local topics of public interest is currently a challenge.

The MRT has a Code of Ethics, a collective agreement, and 17 internal operating manuals and procedures. The journalistic union and association in the past have publicly criticised this act, claiming that its content is not fully in line with either international standards or national law.

**In recent years, the MRT has had a reputation or political bias:** both local media and civil organisations of journalists have accused some members of failing to comply with the requirements laid down by law – formal requirements and the provisions on conflict of interest being a case in point. Media reports have also alleged that some members of the current Managing Board were closely affiliated with ruling parties in the past, some even having a background as party functionaries. Relatively recently, the MRT received a negative evaluation by international monitoring missions, including Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in respect of its coverage of election campaigns and the election day, although according to the same

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reports there was an improvement in this regard in the context of the latest local and parliamentary elections.

### **Adaptation to the digital age**

The MRT completed the digital switchover together with the commercial broadcasting sector in 2013. The public broadcaster was allocated two of the seven available digital multiplexes reserved for television broadcasting.

As regards new digital technologies, the MRT has its own website<sup>2</sup>, which offers all necessary information about available programmes, the programme schedule, news, contact information, etc. Having received a great number of complaints about not having a dedicated section on which the constitutive documents and information about the decisions and sessions of its governing bodies are available, the MRT recently added such a section to its website. On the website simulcast web streaming of all programming services – the three terrestrial TV channels, two satellite channels, and four radio channels (three terrestrial and one satellite) – is available.

The MRT has Facebook and Twitter accounts, its own YouTube channel and a Flickr page. All accounts, together with its RSS feed, are available via the MRT homepage. However, the website does not feature online content that differs from the reports broadcast on the TV or radio channels.

### **Current discussion about public service media in North Macedonia**

The reform of the MRT and transforming it to a financially viable organisation that provides professional media services of a high standard and offers a high-quality media content to the wider audience remains a test for the local authorities.

A procedure for the election of new members of the Programming Council is currently under way, which is expected to be finalised in the summer of 2019. The process is expected to lead to a new composition of the Council that will ensure a higher level of independence. The process is monitored by the local

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<sup>2</sup> The development of the website [www.mrt.com.mk](http://www.mrt.com.mk) caused public reactions because it costs close to 100,000 Euro based on media reports.



media community and the assumption is that the Council should be elected by the national Parliament in the second half of 2019. This means that a new director will be elected – a development that will possibly lead to changes in editorial staff. It is important that the management of the MRT fulfils its obligations stipulated by the law and that the journalists respect the Code of Ethics in order to increase public trust in the media, including its rating which is currently very low.

The reform of the MRT has been the subject of an ongoing debate in recent years and has elicited numerous declarations on the part of the government according to which it intends to address the situation.

In the first half of 2019 and in past periods, several local initiatives<sup>3</sup> have attempted to raise awareness of the important role the MRT plays and motivate the decision makers to take responsible steps to reform the institution. The national Parliament has amended the LAAVMS several times in the last two years.

### Conclusions

The state-of-play of public service media in North Macedonia, respectively the situation of the MRT, can be summarised in seven key points.

1. In the past, the MRT has been treated as easy prey by the ruling parties with a majority in Parliament. As a result, the general public has lost trust in MRT's ability to report on and provide unbiased coverage of current affairs. Due to financial difficulties and lack of internal capacity, the MRT has had difficulties competing on the national media market with quality productions or programmes.
2. The MRT has one of the smallest annual budgets of all public broadcasters in the region and has to produce content in nine languages broadcast through multiple channels, leading to poor financial performance over many years. Given its nature and structure, the MRT requires more resources in order to be able to perform its legal obligations and uphold professional standards on a par with most other PSM in Europe.

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<sup>3</sup> These initiatives are mostly public debates and other forms of activities carried out by local organisations and funded by international donors.

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3. The MRT has faces a number of internal problems at various levels within the organisation due to the flawed system of electing of members to the bodies responsible for its governance and supervision, the lack of resources but equally its poor capacity in terms of human resources with very little progress being made in this respect.
4. The MRT has a poorly developed network of correspondents and according to local reports by civil society organisations until recently its entire network in North Macedonia comprised ten journalists at the most.
5. According to a survey conducted by the Association of Journalists in Macedonia, the journalists at the MRT and staff overall are underpaid and poorly motivated to perform their duties.
6. The MRT has 17 internal procedures which, according to reports of local media organisations, are not fully in line with the LAAVMS.
7. The building in which MRT is based and operates from is in a poor condition and its maintenance is extremely costly.

### Recommendations

1. The Government of North Macedonia must increase the percentage of the national budget allocated to the MRT in order to properly fund its work and enable it to fulfil its legal obligations and create more high-quality content as a way of making it more popular with viewers.
2. An audit of the financial performance and operations of the MRT in the last several years should be conducted and the reports should be published. If any irregularities are found, the Prosecution Office in Skopje should take prompt action.
3. It is crucial that social and economic standards are improved for all employees at the MRT in order to motivate current staff but also attract new qualified personnel, including good journalists.
4. The process of electing new members of the management team, including a director and editors-in-chief should be carefully monitored in order to ensure that the selection process and subsequent appointments are based

on merit. This is a condition precedent for independence from political actors.

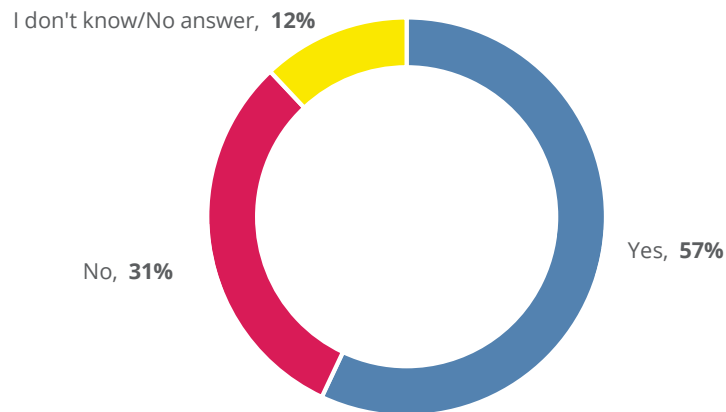
5. The MRT should develop a strategy for increasing local content and developing a strong network of correspondence to this end.
6. The MRT should be more transparent publishing information about its work on its website and amend its internal operating procedures. Technical assistance by local and international organisations and donors is also needed.



**Dragan Sekulovski** has worked for different of non-governmental, governmental and private organisations, most of which are involved in development activities. He has broad work experience in the donor and non-governmental environment in North Macedonia. Since 2011 Sekulovski has been involved in managing strategically important projects of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, supported by different international donors supporting media freedom and democratisation processes in the country. In 2012, he became Executive Director. Sekulovski holds a master's degree in Law.

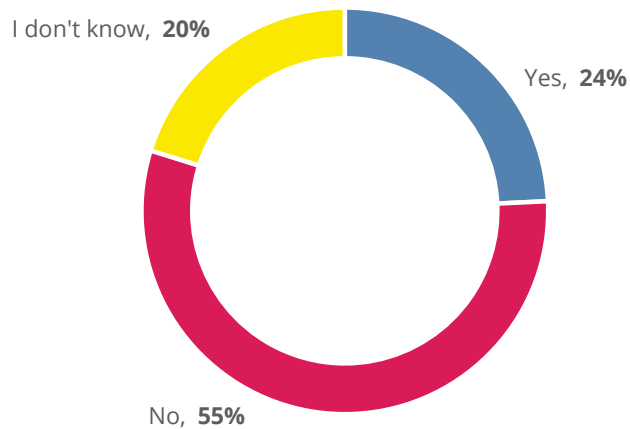
## Opinion Poll North Macedonia

**Chart 1: Are Public Service Media (PSM) important for democracy in your country? (Base: Total North Macedonian sample, in percent)**



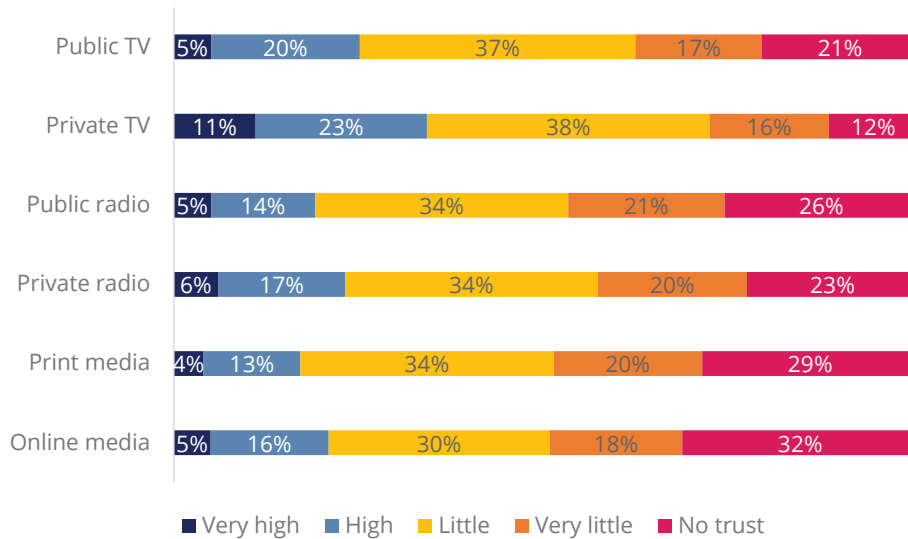
With regard to the importance of PSM for democracy in the country, the citizens of North Macedonia differ significantly in statistical terms from all other respondents who participated in the survey. They place less importance on the role of PSM in a democracy. Almost one-third described PSM as having no importance for democracy (see Chart 1). This relatively high percentage includes the view expressed by respondents with university degrees – 40 percent of them place no importance of PSM for democracy whatsoever.

**Chart 2: In your opinion, are PSM free from political influence in your country? (Base: Total North Macedonian sample, in percent)**



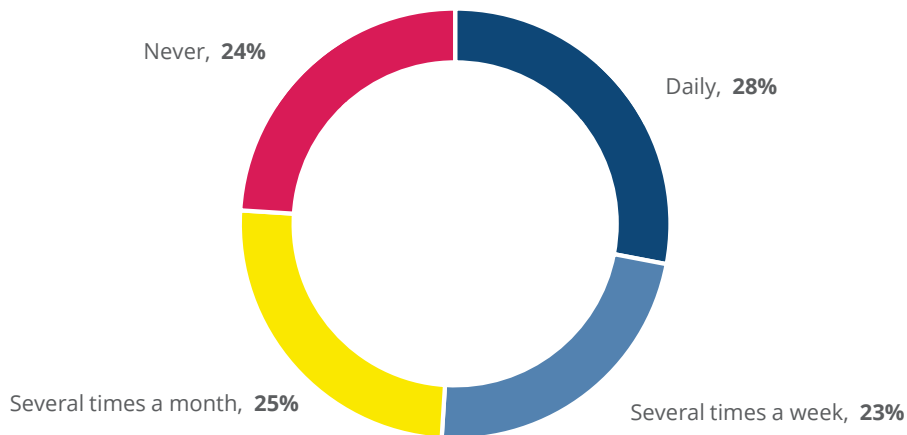
24 percent of the respondents interviewed in North Macedonia believe that PSM are free from political influences (see Chart 2). While this figure corresponds to the general opinion expressed as per the total sample, significant differences are noted among North Macedonian citizens with university degree, with 66 percent believing that PSM are not free from political influence as compared to 43 percent of respondents with primary education and 57 percent with secondary education.

**Chart 3: How much trust do you have in following media? (Base: Total North Macedonian sample, in percent)**



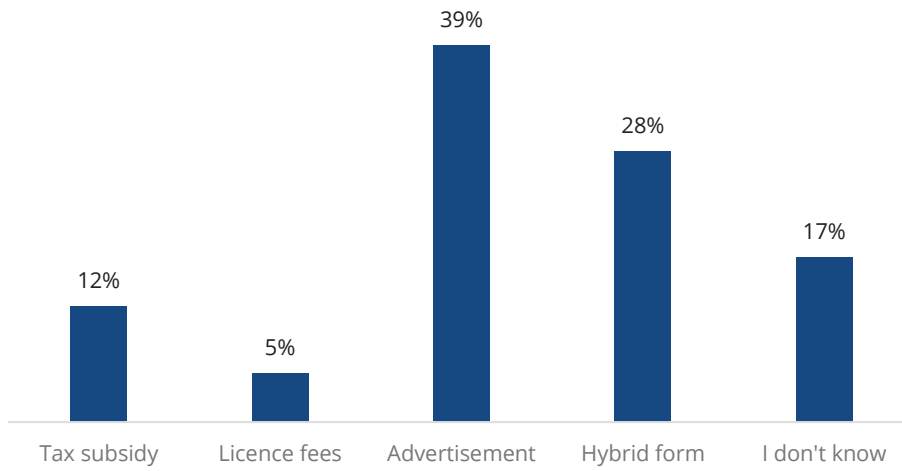
Regarding their trust in different media sources, the respondents in North Macedonia have a lower level of trust in public service media as compared to the average in the region (see Chart 3). The key difference in opinion among the citizens of North Macedonia on this question is based on education: citizens with primary education tend to trust TV more than the average. They are the group in which public television enjoys the highest trust. Notably, citizens aged over 64 years seem to trust TV the most, their level of trust in private channels being higher (44 percent) than their trust the public television (34 percent).

**Chart 4: How often do you use the services of Public Service Media (PSM)?**  
(Base: Total North Macedonian sample, in percent)



North Macedonia is a society in which PSM is used below the average for the respondents surveyed in the total sample. As compared to the rest of the region, it has the highest share of citizens who rarely (only several times a month) or never watch PSM (see Chart 4). This is statistically significant in relation to the age and education of respondents. 38 percent of those aged over 64 years state that they watch the PSM daily as compared to 34 percent of citizens aged 18-29 years who claim to never watch PSM; 36 percent of citizens with primary or lower school education state that they watch PSM daily as compared to 22 percent of respondents with university degrees who have given the same answer.

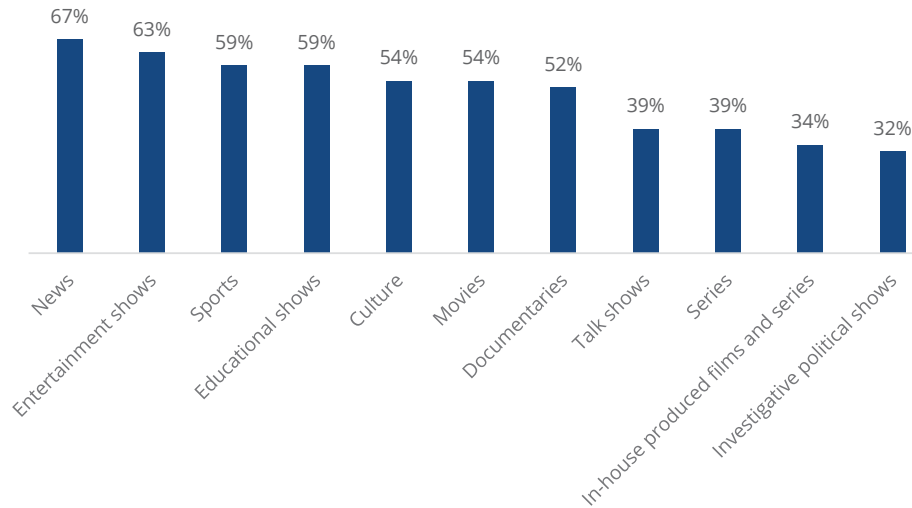
**Chart 5: What type of funding do you prefer for PSM? (Base: Total North Macedonian sample, in percent)**



The citizens of North Macedonia believe that PSM should be financed from advertising (39 percent) rather than a tax subsidy (12 percent) or through licence fees (5 percent), without significant differences in terms of demographic variables.



**Chart 6: What kind of content should PSM present? (Base: Total North Macedonian sample, in percent, multiple answers possible)**



With regard to PSM content, the citizens of North Macedonia lean towards stereotypical patterns: men would like to see more sport programmes (72 percent), compared to women (47 percent), while respondents aged over 64 years would like to see more news (81 percent as compared to 67 percent of the total sample for the country).