

REPORT ON THE SEEMO PRESS FREEDOM MISSION TO THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA / FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

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INTRODUCTION

Objectives

The objective of the press freedom mission conducted by the Vienna-based South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO) was to assess the media situation in the Republic of Macedonia/Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (in this report Macedonia), following a series of media closures, media regulation changes and protests. Since the end of 2010, national and international media organisations, including SEEMO, as well as intergovernmental organizations, have voiced concern over the deteriorating media environment. It appears as if the authorities in Skopje, the country's capital, are deliberately targeting critical media outlets and thus curtailing press freedom. International condemnations have succeeded one another at such a pace that SEEMO decided to visit Skopje several months earlier than planned.

The SEEMO mission visited only Skopje.

Interlocutors

The SEEMO delegation met President Gjorge Ivanov; Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski; Minister of Internal Affairs Gordana Jankulovska; Minister of Transport and Communications Mile Janakievski; Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje Ralf Breth; Austrian Ambassador Alois Kraut; and more than 30 media representatives including owners, directors, editors-in-chief, journalists, media experts, media NGO representatives, and other professionals.

Events that Precipitated International Criticism

International concerns over the deteriorating media situation in the country were triggered by a series of events that occurred within a short span of time.

In early July 2011, three dailies - *Vreme*, *Spic* and *Koha e Re* - owned by local Plus Production were closed. The papers allegedly owed more than one million euros in unpaid taxes. Since they could not pay, the revenue office closed their accounts and 150 journalists lost their jobs.

Several weeks later, the first private broadcaster, A1 TV, also closed down and 243 employees lost their jobs. The TV station owed over nine million euros to tax authorities. Since tax office representatives and station owners could not reach an agreement as to how to finance the outstanding debt, the first private broadcaster went bankrupt.

The three closed dailies as well as A1 TV belonged, directly or indirectly, to Velija Ramkovski, a man who acquired a fortune through different business endeavours. All of his media outlets were influential. Ramkovski supported different governments, including the coalitions created by the VMRO-DPMNE party. However, he recently withheld his support and became critical of the VMRO-DPMNE ruling party. Thus, his initially friendly relations with the government became confrontational.

In December 2010, Ramkovski and his associates were imprisoned on tax fraud charges. His numerous enterprises and media companies were housed in the same building. Media outlets could not be separated from the rest of his businesses. The beginning of the government's legal actions against Ramkovski's enterprises allegedly began, according to many journalists, when A1 TV became critical of the government. The question many interviewees raised was why these legal actions did not start before the changes in editorial policy.

In 2011, several media outlets fired journalists, giving economic reasons as an explanation. At the same time, journalists and media analysts observed that the daily *Dnevnik* suddenly changed its editorial policy.

In July 2011, the parliament approved amendments that regulate the composition of the Broadcasting Council, a regulatory body that monitors electronic media and issues broadcasting licenses, thereby exerting crucial influence on shaping the country's media landscape. Initially, the Council was composed of nine members: two representatives from journalists' associations, two academics, two from the Academy of Sciences, and three members representing Parliament. It enjoyed independence and credibility, despite political pressure. After the amendments, six new members were added: two representing the President, two local authorities and two from other regulatory bodies. All of these institutions are controlled by the governing party. In practice, pro-government members obtained the majority and the capacity to control electronic media. SEEMO was informed that some Council members were allegedly pressured to make certain decisions.

In August 2011, the Council of Macedonian Radio Television (MRTV), the public service broadcaster, announced it had terminated the mandate of all seven members of MRTV's management board on 31 July 2011, although the appointment process for new members has not yet started. This decision left the management board without any members and unable to operate, according to the OSCE statement published on 11 August 2011.

As a result of the above-mentioned sequence of events, the international community and part of the country's public opinion perceived the new media situation as deteriorating. The highest circulation daily changed its editorial policy. Journalists and editors felt increasing pressure and self-censorship became widespread. Journalists organised public rallies in order to protest against massive sackings. The closure, on tax evasion charges, of the most influential television channel and three critical newspapers raised concerns about the selectivity of legal procedures. The country's media landscape was no longer pluralistic.

Political Environment: An Outline

Independent since the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991, the new country has had to struggle for its international recognition because of its name. Known as the Republic of Macedonia within the Yugoslav Federation, the newly independent country named itself Republic of Macedonia, according to the country's constitution. Neighbouring Greece objected to the use of the name Macedonia for the new state since its northern provinces carry the same name. In 1992, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia adopted the term "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia". In 1993, the United Nations admitted the new member under the name Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), as a provisional term to be used

only until the dispute was resolved. However, many countries recognised Macedonia under its constitutional name: Republic of Macedonia.

The name issue has soured relations with Greece and the dispute is ongoing. The name dispute is perceived in Skopje as a question of national identity and it has influenced numerous political decisions. As a result, the state defends Macedonian patriotism.

In 2005, FYROM became a candidate for EU membership. The path to EU integration seemed set. However, in 2008 Greece blocked a NATO invitation for the country over objections to the country's name and **succeeded in vetoing Macedonia's NATO membership**. In 2009, the expected negotiations over EU membership were still on hold. The 2010 and 2011 European Commission progress reports avoided the adjective "Macedonian" and referred to the country's language as "state language", "official language" or "local language". This deliberate use of synonyms had a negative impact on the ground, forging a negative view of the international community and triggering new policies designed to boost national identity based on ancient history.

Since 2009, the governing party, VMRO-DPMNE, has been very active in promoting national renaissance. The project Skopje 2014 forms part of this endeavour. Skopje 2014 aims to give a monumental imprint to the capital city. It envisages the construction of almost 20 buildings, including museums, theatres, concert halls, hotels and administrative offices, as well as several bronze and marble statues. The predominating architectural style is inspired by classic antiquity. Among the myriad large sculptures that adorn the main Skopje square, is a 22-meter high bronze equestrian statue.

While Skopje 2014 has not been completed, the already-inaugurated statues and buildings have permanently altered the city center. Some Macedonians are proud of this artistic depiction of an ancient heritage; others claim that they do not identify with this new identity.

The artifice of this new identity approach is the governing party: the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). It governs in coalition with the Socialist Party of Macedonia, Democratic Union for Integration (party of ethnic Albanians) and other smaller parties.

Opposition parties are: the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM); the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA); the Party for a European Future (PEI); New Democracy (ND); and the New Social Democratic Party (NSDP).

Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (VMRO-DPMNE) has held the post since 2006. He was reelected on 5 June 2011.

During the 2009 local elections, VMRO-DMPNE won in 56 out of 82 municipalities.

It is estimated that the Republic of Macedonia/Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has two million inhabitants. The exact proportion of ethnic Macedonians vs. ethnic Albanians is not known. Officially-used figures are politically motivated. While ethnic Macedonians tend to play down the number of Albanians, the leaders of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia usually plays up the figure. The percentages vary between 20 and 30 percent.

The October 2011 census was annulled due to irregularities. The process was marred by ethnic rows from the start.

MEDIA SCENE

Macedonia has more than a hundred media outlets, including private nationwide television broadcasters and the public MRTV, local and regional television stations, radio stations, and daily newspapers. Considering market size, most media are not economically viable and they depend on government-subsidised campaigns or other business interests of their owners. In fact, most media owners' core business interests lie elsewhere. Media are not considered a profit-making activity. Germany's WAZ group is the only publisher without other business activities.

In addition to the public broadcaster, MRTV, there are 147 commercial broadcasters and three not-for-profit broadcasters.

In total, there are 77 TV broadcasting licences (four national terrestrial; 16 national satellite; 10 regional and 47 local TV channels). National broadcasters are: Kanal 5 TV; Sitel TV; Telma TV; and ALSAT-M TV. The fifth one, A1 TV, dissolved on 31 July 2011 due to bankruptcy over unpaid debt.

MRTV broadcasts three terrestrial TV channels (MTV1, MTV2 and Parliamentary Channel) as well as MKTV-SAT, a satellite channel for the Diaspora.

Further, 71 radio stations broadcast 77 programmes. The public broadcaster MRTV has six radio programmes. There are three non-profit local radio stations, three with national coverage (Antenna 5, Kanal 77 and Metropolis), 16 regional and 49 local radio stations.

Leading Macedonian-language newspapers are: *Dnevnik*, *Vest*, *Utrinski Vesnik*, *Vecer* and *Nova Makedonija*. Leading Albanian-language newspapers are: *Lajm*, *Zhurnal plus*, *Koha* and *Fakti*.

Seven years ago, the combined circulation of all newspapers reached 150,000 copies. Currently, total circulation is around 60,000. This decrease has resulted in a loss of profit for most media outlets. Currently, there is an initiative to establish a new daily paper which would comply with professional standards.

At the same time, several publications have disappeared from the market. The latest to close was the influential weekly *Forum*.

According to some estimates, the number of journalists in Macedonia ranges between 2,000 and 3,000. The Macedonian Journalists' Association claims to have between 400 and 500 members.

Media Ownership and Economic Pressure

Media ownership, economic pressure, a lack of respect for professional standards and the absence of ethics seem to be prevailing problems, according to the information provided by journalists, media executives, government officials, diplomats and NGO representatives.

With the exception of WAZ and some smaller publications, media owners have varied business interests. Some businessmen influence editorial policy in order to protect or promote their economic interests; others exert pressure, blackmail, silence stories of public interest, attack rivals, and support or oppose politicians. One media executive allegedly said: "I have two Kalshiknovs: one is radio and the other is television".

Active and former politicians, as well as their family members or close relatives, own different media outlets, some of them very influential. The law regarding conflict of interest is rarely enforced. Following the closure of A1 TV, the two major TV stations, Channel 5 and SITEL, have become leading commercial broadcasters. Both are owned or managed by the sons of minor political party leaders, members of the governing coalition. Even though the law prohibits the same owner from controlling both print and broadcast media, this legal provision is not enforced. Some media owners use different techniques – for e.g. the creation of proxy companies, or company registration in the names of friends and relatives - to control both dailies and broadcasters.

Media ownership is seen as a way to influence political decisions, often in an abrasive way. According to different statements, Velija Ramkovski, the detained former owner of A1 TV, exerted pressure on politicians, bankers and other business leaders. His illegal activities were tolerated as long as he supported governments in office. Tax authorities focused on his activities, including an alleged illegal biscuit factory in the basement of the TV A1 building, once he decided to withdraw his support for the government. Although the law stipulates that owners of print media cannot simultaneously own a TV broadcaster, Ramkovski had both. His A1 TV, founded in 1993, had the highest share of viewers and was the most influential in the country. Thus, governments tried to avoid his ire for a long time. "The media scene is dominated by businessmen and politicians," said one interlocutor. Both consider it normal to dictate editorial policy and influence editorial decisions, according to the same source. Even before the A1 TV case, "it was not clear where politics started and media ended

or vice versa". Some journalists acted as politicians. They were candidates in the June 2011 parliamentary elections.

The detention of Velija Ramkovski in December 2010 had some positive effects, many interviewees agreed: many media owners started giving contracts to journalists and paying them legally, instead of giving out cash in envelopes. Some even paid for journalists' social security, according to the law. Second, major TV owners tried to improve their relations with tax authorities and paid their outstanding tax debts. However, it is difficult to assess to what extent the law is abided by: while the government claims that tax authorities treat all media owners equally, several journalists wondered if all electronic media complied with all the regulations.

Several journalists recounted examples of how they had to kill a story because it affected business interests of their media owner. They also gave examples of other journalists blackmailing businessmen, for as little as 200 euros, in order to keep silent or abstain from attacks. It is difficult to prove these blackmailing practices and outright corruption because every interviewed journalist offered a story about some colleague or another media outlet but never admitted to engaging in these illegal practices, which cross political and ideological lines. The accusers were often the accused and vice versa. SEEMO was not presented with any evidence. However, these practices seemed to exist both in Skopje and in smaller towns. Several interviewees mentioned them. Even official representatives did not deny them.

The lack of proper contracts or fixed salaries affects many journalists. Some learned, by accident, that their employers had not paid their social benefits for years or paid smaller amounts than legally stipulated. The common practice was to deposit part of the salary in the bank account and pay the rest in cash. This precarious economic situation rendered journalists vulnerable to economic offers and corrupt practices. Even the honest reporters had to think twice before investigating a story that could affect their status, the status of their news outlet or provoke the anger of the editor, equally pressed to abstain from pursuing certain stories or magnifying other news. "Media are corruptible; provided the bribe is high enough, they will never uncover "dirty linen", one media NGO representative said.

WAZ executives and journalists working for WAZ-owned dailies agreed that the German company complied with legal regulations. The WAZ manager said: "Tax officers come here every year; they stay for months and control everything. We pay taxes, social security and we respect the law. Nobody found any irregularity. How can one speak of the European Union if one engages in criminal activities?"

However, there is speculation, based on WAZ's retreat from other West Balkan countries, and on some statements, that the company may also decide to sell

its media company in Macedonia and move out. That way, the only foreign investor in media business would disappear. There are fears that WAZ-owned publications would be purchased by local businessmen close to the ruling party.

Finally, the public broadcaster Macedonian Radio and Television serves as a state broadcasting service, not a public one. MRTV's fee of 130 Macedonian denars (approx two euros) is low, and makes MRTV's operational budget financially untenable. The model based upon the MRTV fee collected via the Public Revenue Office of Macedonia is a good one, yet it only translates into collection of 60 percent of the fees. However, even if the collection rate reached 100 percent, the amount of income originating from this source would fall short of the funds necessary to implement the process of digitalisation which is due in 2012, according to the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) requirements. Effectively, MRTV will continue to be dependent on governmental funding and subsidies. It has recently received important funds. However, this broadcaster is watched by less than 5 percent of TV viewers.

Government Campaigns

Government-sponsored campaigns are perceived as an essential source of income. "Media cannot live from their activities because the market is small and crowded," explained one media NGO representative. "The price of newspapers can barely cover printing and distribution costs," this analyst added. The commercial advertising market is small. Both print and broadcast media depend on government campaigns, virtually all interlocutors said. However, they ignored how campaign allotments were distributed. The common perception was that pro-government media received most or all of it.

"Commercial advertising market is very weak," explained one media executive and explained that government advertisements represented an important market share. Some said it was more than 50 percent.

It was impossible to obtain the exact information related to the budget distribution of government campaigns, which encompassed the promotion of national identity, the fight against poverty, the work of government enterprises, etc. While the prime minister assured the delegation that their allocation was transparent and in accordance with market share and circulation, government representatives did not provide SEEMO with any figures. In spite of an official promise during the meeting in Skopje and an insistence in several e-mail messages, no official information was provided regarding the amount of money allocated for campaigns and how it was distributed.

One media executive calculated that government had had 36 campaigns in recent years, excluding those that promoted state-owned enterprises. The same

source calculated that government expenditure on campaigns amounted to 30 million euros per year. Other sources spoke of 20 million euros. The exact figure is not known, but every single journalist, editor, media executive and NGO representative mentioned those campaigns as an essential source of income for the outlets that supported government policies. Some speculated that certain dailies changed their editorial policy in order to receive these funds. A1 TV was a major recipient of campaign money while it supported the government. These funds, according to media executives, have a distorting effect on the media market.

Legal Actions

Journalists remain subject to criminal and civil libel charges, though imprisonment has been eliminated as a punishment. Multiple libel cases against journalists were pending in 2011. In 2010, 167 lawsuits were filed, mostly by politicians. The large number of cases encourages self-censorship.

While the prime minister stated that the members of the governing VMRO-DMPNE party were instructed not to sue journalists, some party members do not seem to be following these instructions. Several weeks after the SEEMO mission, the editor-in-chief of *Fokus* magazine was sentenced to pay 15,000 euros to Antonio Milososki, former minister of foreign affairs, and current VMRO-DMPNE deputy. The former minister did not question the veracity of the text, according to *Fokus*. He did not like its title. The sum of 15,000 euros is disproportionate in a country in which the average journalist earns between 200 euros and 400 euros per month. *Fokus* appealed the court decision.

Some journalists recounted that law suits and judiciary procedures against journalists had developed at an enormous speed in a country in which the judicial system is slow. One journalist claimed that only four judges dealt with media-related cases. Court procedures appear to be selective: some trials are fast while other are prolonged for years until they become obsolete. Their impact is mostly psychological.

Law suits rain down from different directions: businessmen sue journalists, politicians sue journalists and journalists sue journalists. However, it is not clear if this avalanche of legal actions is intended to seek justice or to intimidate. Some cases drag on for months, others go through express procedures, many are dropped. Attending court trials has become a weekly routine for some journalists. The increasing number is perceived as mounting pressure and intimidation.

Journalists sentenced to pay fines are expected to do so out of their own pocket. Editors usually do not stand by their employees. Some journalists pay out of their salaries. Others strike deals with friendly businessmen, who pay

their fines in exchange for different services, according to some interlocutors who claimed to know of such cases.

The implementation of laws and regulations was perceived as selective by most interviewees. Law enforcement was generally perceived as politically motivated even though nobody questioned the prevalence of illegal practices: the lack of trust is generalized.

Professional Standards

“It is impossible to have quality journalism, either because the editor wants to avoid problems or because he/she cannot resist political pressure,” one NGO representative said. “Media do not inform, they try to convince,” this expert added. “There is no journalism in Macedonia, neither on the left nor on the right,” another media analyst opined. “When you have journalists that cannot afford food, you cannot expect them not to be compromising under pressure. You have media owners and editors that are misusing journalists, putting their own political interests in the work of journalist,” a third media expert explained.

Lack of professionalism and low journalistic standards constitute another common denominator of the media scene, claimed most SEEMO interlocutors. However, the perceptions of which practices constitute those low standards seem to vary, depending on political views. Government critics find it inadmissible that a Sitel TV journalist would use his show to read a list of journalists’ names and label them as traitors. In other words, he publically accused them of treason. The government did not react. On the other hand, pro-government journalists interpreted this action as freedom of speech and claimed that critical journalists acted against national interests.

In an interview with the state news agency, MIA, published on 18 October 2011, Prime Minister Gruevski criticised the former A1 TV journalist, Borjan Jovanovski, for posing a particular question during a press conference in Brussels, Belgium, on 12 October 2011. Gruevski accused the journalist of asking a “prearranged question”, intended “to prepare the terrain” for the eventuality that the European Commission might issue a negative report on Macedonia in 2012.

Gruevski asked why Jovanovski was sitting in the press room, and why it was him and not another journalist who had the right to ask a question. While the prime minister did not describe Jovanovski as a traitor, other journalists did use these and other labels to point a finger at him and other critical journalists.

Campaigns designed to foster national identity sometimes use questionable methods. The public broadcaster, MRTV, perceived as a party mouthpiece, does not always follow international standards and, according to some, promotes questionable values. In 2009 MRTV ran a promotional film called

Macedonian Prayer (*Makedonska Molitva*). In this nine-minute video, 'God' speaks to Macedonians, calling them the oldest nation and progenitors of the white race, as opposed to "Negroids" and "Mongoloids".

The voice in off says:

"From you, Macedonians, the descendants of Macedon, I have impregnated the white race, and everything began from you ... All white people are your brothers because they carry the Macedonian gene."

In addition to promoting questionable values, the MRTV program was perceived as unbalanced, favouring the government and disparaging the opposition. The biased reporting was especially evident during the pre-election campaigns. According to some reports, experienced journalists are often sidelined in favour of younger colleagues who are easier to control and more vulnerable to editorial pressure designed to ensure that they produce non-balanced stories.

Most journalists and NGO representatives agreed that reporting on ethnic, gender, religious and minority issues sometimes reflected hate speech.

All interlocutors agreed that education and training of journalists should be set as a priority

Divided Society, Divided Journalists

"There is no debate; you are with us or against us," was a notion used by many journalists in describing the media scene and the impossibility of organising a debate on any issue. It is not important what is said, but who says it, most interviewees opined. Others called Macedonian society 'binary'. Another division consists of patriots versus traitors. Those who do not support the governing party are automatically considered supporters of the opposition. Independent thinking is rare.

In practical terms, this means that there is no solidarity among journalists who publicly attack one other. TV debates, to give an example, are difficult to organise since one side usually declines the invitation. Issues are not discussed and media try to influence rather than inform. Some media outlets do escape this division, and even gain praise from both sides, but they tend to have low market share and scant circulation. Currently, there is no major media that is critical of the government. It would be unrealistic to strive for independent media, for the time being, said one expert. Since both sides are exclusive, one should strive for pluralism, as a starting point, the expert said.

The explosion of media animosities culminated in Brussels on 20 September 2011. A political group within the European Parliament organised a roundtable discussion on media freedom in Macedonia and invited several journalists and human rights activists. Unhappy with the title of the discussion and the fact that

only critical journalists were invited to the event, three pro-government journalists decided to travel to Brussels on their own and explain their point of view. One participant said that he was outraged that only one side was present in Brussels and he wanted to express his point of view. He paid for the trip out of his own pocket, he said. The encounter between the two sides in Brussels ended in a shouting match and insults, involving both journalists and organisers. The incident was broadcast in Skopje many times. One side argued that the original participants at the roundtable debate were traitors; the other side claimed that the government organised its propagandists to torpedo the meeting in Brussels. Probably, neither claim was correct. Everyone forgot that the organisers had the right to invite whom they pleased.

Many journalists and experts claimed that prior to the VMRO-DMPNE rule the media were not independent either. Political parties always perceived them as their own instruments. Yet, they claim, the situation has deteriorated in the past two years.

There is no uniform opinion about the current media situation. This sharp division, apparently unbridgeable, is also reflected in how journalists perceive the media scene: pro-government journalists consider that the country does not lack media freedoms and that the public should decide what they like. Critics see the situation as disastrous, difficult to mend, and think that only external pressure could change this tendency towards a one-way-of-thinking monopoly.

In addition to the intra-Macedonian disputes, there is an ethnic divide between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians. The latter consume Albanian-language media. Some media outlets in Albanian are stationed in Macedonia while others broadcast from Albania or Kosovo. Skopje-based ALSAT-M TV Channel is bilingual: it broadcasts in Macedonian and Albanian, although the high costs of bilingualism will probably mean that it is converted into an Albanian-only channel.

All these divisions have affected journalists' associations and unions that are currently trying to reinvent themselves.

The new leadership of the Macedonian Journalists' Association (ZNM) is making positive steps in trying to breach these apparently insurmountable divisions and establish a dialogue with the authorities. ZNM representatives said: "We consider that there has not been media freedom since the nineties. Media were created by political parties and they controlled them. Thus, even the so-called independent media were established by those who had political interests." ZNM has set up a working group with some government representatives aimed at addressing the following issues: selective implementation of laws; transparency of government campaigns; decriminalisation of defamation and libel; and reform of the public broadcaster, traditionally used as a party broadcaster.

Finally, in spite of verbal aggressions, the number of physical attacks against journalists has declined.

These divisions and problems are not adequately reflected in international reports, claimed one NGO representative. Since 2005, when the country acquired its EU candidate status, several international donors withdrew their funds for media support while Brussels-based diplomats began to use diplomatic formulations when describing the media scene, rather than mentioning real problems.

CONCLUSIONS

The level of media freedom in the Republic of Macedonia/Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is considered to be partly free by Freedom House. The SEEMO mission made similar conclusions. While there are no journalists in jail and physical attacks are not common, the media landscape is not pluralistic, with the exception of some smaller media outlets with limited public opinion impact.

Practically all individuals interviewed by the SEEMO delegation spoke of political, economic and legal pressure on media that induced self-censorship. Nobody denied that some journalists were also involved in illegal practices, like blackmailing businessmen or striking lucrative deals. Everyone agreed that there were low professional standards, and many underlined the lack of ethics. Most flagged up the prevalence of extortive practices and blackmailing on all sides. Everyone agreed that society was divided. Yet, while the pro-government supporters argued that laws were finally being enforced, exemplifying this statement with the A1 TV closure and its owner's incarceration, critics perceived the very same actions as selective, politically motivated, and designed to stifle media freedom.

Although specific cases of political pressure against journalists were cited - work bans included - no evidence was provided. Yet, there is evidence that the government has permeated the Broadcasting Council, initially independent, in order to control its decisions. In such a polarised society, rumors are abundant but facts are scarce. Neither side seems willing or able to offer any facts, numbers, and charts. For some, the situation is seemingly desperate; for others, there is no reason for complaint. As a result, readers and viewers are deprived of information of public interest.

While critics consider that only international political pressure can induce the government to change its media-related policies and practices, government apologists consider any foreign intervention or criticism as an intrusion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

SEEMO praises the first initiatives aimed at establishing dialogue between media and government representatives. Non-selective implementation of laws and regulations, transparency of media campaigns, guaranteeing the independence of regulatory bodies, establishing the basis for proper functioning of the public broadcaster and respect of professional standards are the obvious targets to be reached. Laws exist. They have to be implemented in a non-selective manner. However, their implementation depends on political will and it seems to be missing.

The European Commission and international media watchdogs should continue to monitor the situation and keep up the pressure and ensure that international media standards are met. The international community can apply pressure to the government to implement its own laws. However, that pressure should be sustained and consistent, rather than *ad hoc*. Occasional protests are perceived as politically selective and imbalanced.

On the other hand, international donors and institutions should provide technical assistance and support for the local initiatives designed to overcome the current political divisions and create a stable and free media environment, in which rules are respected and illegal practices eliminated.

In addition, defamation should be decriminalised while libel laws should be amended to avoid disproportionately elevated fines.