

I

Considering my two decades in this business, in the media that always belonged to those called independent – regardless whether one agree or not with this term – let me present my brief view of the media situation in the region and then specifically in Montenegro where I come from.

II

Naturally, many (pointless) words have been spent on independence of media, but Rupert Murdoch has said it in one sentence – media is independent as much money they have. Still, in one moment of the history of this region, when all the media were state-owned and controlled by politics, I consider independent those media who found strength and courage to fight for the freedom of opinion and freedom of expression instead of political uniformed thought, for credibility instead of propaganda, for justice instead of proclaimed higher interest and finally for the free market competition instead of widespread nepotism.

III

I think that the process of conquering and extending freedom of expression and media has an upward trend in the whole region, and that encouraging level of those freedoms has been achieved.

Encouraging primarily because the process has gone forward irreversibly and I would say there is no return to the tragic nineties, hate speech and all other things that produced war, war crimes, and crime. On the other hand, it is clear not enough has been achieved, and the free space for media could have been made wider.

Media freedom, freedom of expression and solidarity has reached, in my opinion, an encouraging level, primarily because the processes in society inevitably have gone forward. There is no more return, I would say, to the dark times of the nineties when the party headquarters directed what is going to be published or broadcast in the media. Such creation of unified «thought» created hate speech, and hate speech and propaganda become the main driving force of war and war crimes. Although the truth is the first casualty of any war, there was at least one media in each country of the region, at least one group of independently thinking journalist who had courage to contravene the war and political propaganda with truth and reason.

It might be pretentious, but in my opinion, these independent media deserve the credit for their countries psychological, social, economic and political transition happened at all after the war. To be honest, the transition has not been completely finished in no country of the region, while transition and various consequences of war brought new challenges and new problems to these media.

Sometimes and somewhere, as in Montenegro, let's say, it looks as if the war has not been finished. Some would say, well it has not. Today we fight the liberation war with the scourges of the criminal war in the nineties. That is why, in my opinion, main obstacles for further media development and expanding media freedom and responsibility (it is important to emphasize we need more media freedom but also responsibility of the media) are the society deviations derived from the war and negative transition. Here I mean organized crime primarily.

Thus, organized crime as the product of war and war crimes is the main danger threatening all the countries of the Western Balkans. Organized crime devastates all the parts of the society, trying to infiltrate all the decision making places - using corruption, money laundering, lobbying - including media as important factor in creating public opinion and making political decisions. I would say that the status of the organized crime in any of our states determines the state of media freedom and democracy in general.

That is why I think that media situation differs from country to country and I would repeat it directly corresponds to the level of fight against the scourge called organized crime. Logical conclusion from such a view is this: as the government in a country more progress in the fight against organized crime, the media freedom gets wider, society gets freer, democracy more stable. And vice versa – in countries that still did not make a political decision to unreservedly fight organized crime as a senior US diplomat said – in countries where organized crime goes hand in hand with high politics we have a worse media picture and much bigger problems for the functioning of media and freedom of

expression in general.

To illustrate this: the latest Gallup poll for the Western Balkans region showed that percentage of those who think that majority or many people are afraid to openly state their political opinion is by far the biggest in Montenegro and it reaches astonishing 64 percent.

IV

As I could follow media in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Montenegro in our same language daily, I could conclude: I am very envious to the media freedom level in Croatia, I am “only” jealous to that one in Serbia, while I even envy our Bosnian colleagues, although Bosnia could hardly be a positive example in anything, unfortunately.

Therefore, it is not difficult to conclude on the factual bases and judging by the ambient ion the society and the media, that situation we have in Montenegro, unfortunately, is very far from satisfactory and below the level in our neighborhood. This implies the answer why is that so: Because there is still no political decision in Montenegro to unreservedly fight organized crime and corruption as Mr. Countryman the State Department Western Balkans chief! That is why independent media, especially during the recent Prime Minister Djukanovic’s mandate, have passed through a very difficult period, Golgotha one could say. This is difficult for outsiders to grasp, because the country progressed in the EU integration process in the same period.

So, at the formal level we went forward, in real life we went backwards when it comes to media freedom, freedom of expression and democratic processes in a society in general.

This is best illustrated by the fact that we had for years the most senior members of government and most senior members of organized crime, together and hand in hand, sometimes with the same team of lawyers, sue and persecute independent media and their journalists in other manners with the aim to intimidate us, obstruct us, and stop us.

In the last couple of years there were over fifty law suits against the three independent media in Montenegro, for two years a TV station was denied frequency for broadcasting, no advertising from the government or the ruling party was placed in these media in the same period, including the election campaigns despite these media being the most influential in the country. Moreover, we had dozens of cases of anonymous phone calls, text messages and letters threatening journalists and editors working in our media, we have survived several physical assaults to a number of independent journalists; we had brutal murder of the daily Dan’s publisher. More terrifying fact is that none of those cases has been solved, nor there any serious investigation in these cases. To the contrary, the top of the government and police as its service did everything to make impossible any serious investigations and arresting the perpetrators of these crimes.

All this in front of European Commission and its delegation in Podgorica, whose representatives in most of these cases make themselves heard only through the law profile written statements on the need to resolve these cases.

Natasa Kandic, the person that is perhaps the most relevant person in the region to comment on human rights, media freedom, and democracy issues has described our situation the most vividly. In September 2009, she said that a campaign that authorities in Montenegro wage against Vijesti, our media, is the most brutal one, seen in the previous 20 years in the region. Meaning, worse then in the nineties and Milosevic’s time.

Regretfully, I have to say that is also our view and our experience. Although we worked in the independent media during the times of war and crimes when the Prime Minister mentioned was in unity with Milosevic, we were nowhere near the obstacles and pressures we have during the last several years of EU integration. It is not only perception or impression, but also the facts I mentioned on the number of lawsuits, physical assaults, obstruction through denying advertising, etc.

In 2009, a respectable US research agency did a study on corruption and crime for USAID in several months. Conclusions was that corruption is widespread and its network ranges from top to bottom, while the leaders in fighting corruption and crime are newspaper Vijesti and NGO MANS. We were proud of that fact, but it shows the background of our problems – we are targeted as the sole obstacle

to the government to continue to use all the state resources in accordance to their private interests. The fact that great majority of other media not only try their best to turn a blind eye but also to defend and protect those people who are pillars of corruption and organized crime from any critique not to mention scandal or processing them in courts. This fact, with weak opposition, undeveloped business, tradition of controlled and freedomless society – all this made and still makes our position even more difficult, because the most powerful circles and promoters of corruption logically and easily concluded they have only one problem – the mentioned newspaper and the NGO.

Many times, we have appealed to our colleagues in other media to get down to this serious business, to compete with us - who would expose more corruption scandals and crimes and who would do that in a better and more serious way – but to no avail. Instead of doing that and handling the corrupted and criminal, all these media put the focus on us, trying to obstruct us in every possible way. Again, as in those terrifying nineties that we thought were gone never to come back.

V

We were glad that EC late last year realized the seriousness of the situation and finally wrote the progress report that realistically and objectively describes the state of Montenegro and detects the genuine problems of the society. We would have liked they did that earlier, because the media who promote European standards and values would have breathed easier. Nevertheless, better now than never.

As the result of these new, I repeat more realistic EU approach, but also the US approach to the situation in Montenegro, the political change came about. We have a new Prime Minister who tries to promote the new system of genuine EU values. However, as long as the shadow of the former anti-European Prime Minister (who is now the president of the ruling party) hangs over his and our heads it is hard to believe that Montenegro would meaningfully move forward in the democratic standards and media freedom.

VI

However, I am not a pessimist. Firstly, I am glad that the story we go through in Montenegro now is a little bit boring, because you got out of that nightmare long time ago or just recently – but mainly irreversibly – and now you are facing problems more or less media in developed democracy face – how to protect your editorial policies from advertisers influence, from the government influence, how to be better from the competitors on the market, even if it is unfair, etc...

The fact that most of the countries in the region have come a long way on the road of conquering new freedom of media and expression is very important to overcome the present situation in Montenegro. As if the principle of connected fluid containers rules here, all the bad things quickly overflow from neighbor to neighbor in the past while now positive trends spread unstoppably through the region from country to country.

Few months ago a prominent Croatian TV journalist visited Montenegro, recognized in the region as one of the best political commentators and analysts. After couple of days of watching our public TV Mr. Bago said it looks very anachronistic now, that resembles the Croatian TV in Tudjman times in the early nineties.

I think it is very important that changes are happening in the region because this process would inevitably spread to Montenegro.

VII

Thank you for your patience

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