

# While caring for others, journalists forget about their rights

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Labor rights are not forbidden topic in the Macedonian media, but still, with a short search on the internet portals of Macedonian media we can conclude that this topic has been treated rarely and superficially. Most of the articles connected with the labor rights in Macedonia are reports from press-conferences of state institutions, trade unions or non-governmental organizations. Rarely one can read, listen or watch an in-depth analysis or investigative story with the labor rights as a main topic, despite the fact that we continuously hear information about breach of labor rights in Macedonia.

Logically, one question pops up: What are the reasons for this? Why journalists and editors are not more interested in this topic, which in a state with poor economy and high rates of unemployment should continuously be a subject of analysis and investigation.

One of the possible answers to this question is connected with the fact that in the last decade the media sphere in Macedonia was completely changed in negative direction. Digitalization, internet and social networks changed the way the audience/public perceives journalism. The traditional way of selecting, preparing, processing and publishing the news nowadays is a rarity. The most important things today are the speed, number of posts, clicks, likes, shares and no resources are spared for reaching high numbers, because exactly this brings profit to the media. Analytical, investigative and critical journalism which requires serious resources, both financial and human, does not bring the needed profit for functioning of the media. This means that in the race for profits and increase of the viewership and readership throws behind the basic journalistic principles, decreases the possibility of keeping the professional standards and in the same time puts the truth aside. With the truth aside, the public interest is also neglected, and protecting the public interest is the main responsibility of journalism as a profession.

All mentioned above, pushed by the decade long misuse of most of the media through “buying” their loyalty with budget resources and turning them into instruments of the state propaganda contributed for drastic decrease of quality of journalism. This on the other hand contributed to decrease of the audience’s trust in the media.

According to the report<sup>1</sup> of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) from March 2018 Macedonia together with Great Britain is on the second place according to the distrust in

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<sup>1</sup> Annual report of European Broadcasting Union for 2017-18  
[https://www.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/codes/annual-report\\_2017-2018/index.htm#/](https://www.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/codes/annual-report_2017-2018/index.htm#/)

the media with 52 percent of the citizens that do not trust media (worse is only Malta with 53%). This epilogue is logical if we take into consideration the fact that the owners of the media do not need quality, educated and professionally prepared workers, workers with integrity, because with them it would be much harder to implement their agendas.

The possible answer on the question above might be that media in Macedonia are not interested, or very rarely write and publish in depth about labor rights because in the media the number of journalists who know and can assess the labor rights are very few and that is one of the most important issues in developed and democratic societies, and in the same time precondition for independent and professional journalism. Even by reading those few information and reports on labor rights one can conclude that there is potential for a series of investigations and analysis of the sources as well as the consequences of the breach of the labor rights.

### *To realize it, you have to know the right*

The second possible answer of the question why labor rights are rarely treated in the media is related to the fact that journalists and media workers do not know well enough their rights.

According to the survey conducted by the Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers<sup>2</sup>, more than 60 percent of the journalists said that they do not know the provisions of the Labor Law. This percent is practically higher having in mind that more than half of those who said that do know the rights of the employees gave wrong answers on the other questions such as: How long does it last the apprenticeship? and What is the minimum guaranteed number of days for holyday?

This leads to the conclusion that the labor rights are neglected by the Macedonian media, and are not subject of continuous analysis, because most of the journalists do not know the rights they are entitled to. Of course, aside of the above-mentioned reasons there are series of others reasons as well, but in this article, we are going to analyze first and foremost the basic, minimal rights that most often have been breached almost by all companies in Macedonia.

The right to work 40 hours per week is rarely respected in the Macedonian media industry and there is almost no case where a media owner pays to the employees for their overtime work as it is written in the Labor Law<sup>3</sup>. In most of the Macedonian media companies pay the so-called holiday money at the end of the year, but most of the employees, except in the companies where they have trade unions, do not know that the amount of the holiday money cannot be decided by the owner himself. According to the

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<sup>2</sup> SSNM conducted the survey in the period of September-October 2018 on 88 journalists from 25 digital media

<sup>3</sup> Labor Law <http://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/zakoni/ZRO%20Precisten%2074-15.pdf>

Law the owner has to determine the amount of holiday money in coordination with the trade union representative or at least representative of the employees if there is no trade union in the company. The right of holiday is also not respected in the Macedonian media. Therefore, according to the SSNM survey even though the participants confirmed that they get the minimum of 20 days for holiday as stipulated with the Labor Law, nonetheless even 74 percent said that they had to work off some of the days they spent on holiday. The same goes with the right for free days.

### *Precarity, low salaries, pressures, risks...*

One of the specific things related to the labor rights of journalists and media workers is the precarity, defined as insecurity of the working position as well as of the income. The precarity in the last decade has been spreading in the media industry and not only in Macedonia, but everywhere, and slowly and steady has become one of the most serious “threats for free and professional journalism as a precondition for free and open society”<sup>4</sup>.

In the publication titled “Precarity in the media industry” published in 2014, the precarity is defined as a phenomenon in which the workers, in this case journalists and media workers, find themselves in situation of:

*“long-term, dependent, part-time or occasional job, in complete existential and professional insecurity, job with short term contracts, that do not provide rights and protection and which can be terminated with no consequences for the employer”.*<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting that in the poll for the needs of the same publication even 78 percent of the journalists and media works said that they are not familiar with the phrase precarity, even though according to the same poll, more than one third of the journalists do not have safe contracts in their media or are being employed as part-time workers. In compare to other surveys it can be concluded that the situation is not improving. Therefore, according to the survey conducted by SSNM in August 2017 more than half (54 percent) of journalists and media workers do not have steady and long-term contracts – 35 percent are employed with short term contracts and 19 percent are part-time workers<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Precarity in the media industry <http://ssnm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Prekarna-rabota-vo-mediumskata-industrija-fin.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Precarity in the media industry <http://ssnm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Prekarna-rabota-vo-mediumskata-industrija-fin.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://ssnm.org.mk/komentari/%d0%bf%d0%bb%d0%b0%d1%82%d0%b0%d1%82%d0%b0-%d0%b2%d0%be-%d0%bc%d0%b5%d0%b4%d0%b8%d1%83%d0%bc%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b5-%d0%b7%d0%b0%d0%b3%d0%bb%d0%b0%d0%b2%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%b0-%d0%bf%d0%be%d0%b4-%d0%bf%d1%80>

Precisely the precarity, but also the lack of organization and solidarity among journalists and media workers contributes the owners of the media to control the game, starting with the professional standards, working conditions and up to the amount of the salary. According to the same poll even 45 percent of the journalists have salaries lower than



Извор: ССНМ - Секој пети вработен во медиумите може да биде отпуштен во секој момент.

the average salary in Macedonia, which in August 2017 was 22,808 denars (approximately 370 euros). The situation today is probably worse having in mind that the

Висина на платите во македонските медиуми - извор ССНМ (август 2017)

average salary on national level in September 2018 was 24,355 denars (approximately 396 euros).<sup>7</sup>



One of the possible solutions for the problem with low salaries is signing a collective agreement which would mean guaranteed minimal wage for journalists and media workers. For now, except in the public broadcasting service Macedonian Radio-television, no other media in Macedonia has signed collective agreement with its employees.

Insecure jobs, possibility of losing the jobs at any time, low salaries, contracts that do not guarantee any rights, are sufficient features for one profession to lose its attractiveness.

If we add the overtime work, overload with assignments, occasional work under dangerous conditions as well as everyday pressures – starting with the editors, owners, ending with the authorities, in that case the information that 69 percent of the journalists in digital media surveyed by SSNM who have said that would like to leave the profession if there is an opportunity for that, is easily understandable. This is not the case only in

<sup>7</sup> State office for statistics <http://www.stat.gov.mk/PrikaziSoopstanie.aspx?rbtxt=40>

Macedonia. Almost the same percentage of journalist from the other countries in the region would leave the media industry.

According to the survey conducted for the publication “Invisible violence: stories from the newsrooms”<sup>8</sup> among journalists from Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina up to 70 percent of the journalists would like to leave journalism as a profession. In all available researches about the situation in the media in Macedonia and in the region almost the same reasons for leaving the profession are being cited: low salary, overload with work, different pressures from centers of power and censorship.

### *What should be done?*

Recognizing the reasons that led to this situation of the media and their employees is the easier part of the job. The harder part is solving these issues by answering the questions “what” and “how” should be done in order to improve the working conditions in the media, journalists to defend themselves from the pressures, receive higher salaries etc. with a goal the profession to restore its integrity and attractiveness.

*Што според вас е најважно да се смени за да се подобри ситуацијата во новинарството и медиумите? Извор: CCHM 2018*



To reach a point where the number of journalists willing to leave the media industry will be insignificant, people

with integrity to work in the media, and they would receive enough money in order to be able to resist different pressures and not to exchange the professional standards with fear for their own existence, and at the end of the day the media to increase the public trust in them.

According to the answers that journalists and media workers gave in the mentioned surveys the most important preconditions for improving the economic

and social status are: higher salaries, respect of the labor rights, social and health insurance, secure working position. Decrease of the dependence of the media from political influences, decrease of the dependence from economic influences and higher level of freedom of expression, are the secondary preconditions to be fulfilled in order to improve the media situation.

### *Recommendations*

<sup>8</sup> “Invisible violence: stories from the newsrooms”

<https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://www.cdtmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Nevidljivo-nasilje-B5-stampa-1.pdf&hl=en>

Labor rights and working conditions are very important for quality journalism and media with public trust. Quality journalism on the other hand means well informed citizens and continuous control of the authorities. The working conditions in the Macedonian media are on a low level, especially when we look at the financial part of it. Therefore, unity and organized action of journalists and media workers is required in order the needed rights to be realized and the conditions for implementing the professional standards in the media to be fulfilled. The European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) have scanned the worsened situation in the media industry and noted the need for strong unity, solidarity and organizing of journalists and media workers in the battle for better conditions and rights in this profession:

*“The emergence of online journalists, social media journalists, multi-media journalists, entrepreneurial journalists and many other forms of doing journalism has not only challenged the traditional notion of being a journalist, it has also led to demands for jobs, new skills, trainings and protections of their professional rights. No, one thing remains the same – rights and jobs in journalism ho hand in hand together; without decent pay and equal rights for journalists, quality journalism cannot be guaranteed”.*<sup>9</sup>

Taking into consideration the specifics of the development of the Macedonian media industry, as well as the conclusions from the EFJ handbook we publish these recommendations:

- Stronger organized and collective pressure on the employers for improvement of the labor rights and working conditions, as for example signing collective agreements or branch collective agreement. The need of collective agreement in the media is also mentioned in the European Union progress report for Macedonia for 2018, where it is noted that there is no progress in protection of the labor rights of journalists, information that according to the report is directly connected with the fact that “journalists still practice self-censorship”.<sup>10</sup>
- Improvement of the strategy for attracting the journalists and media workers, i.e. their increased activity in the professional associations (SSNM, AJM)
- Stronger activity of the association in informing their members, and not only them, but also the public, about the rights that are entitled to journalists and media workers, with special attention to those who are subject to precarity

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<sup>9</sup> <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2016/10/27/rights-and-jobs-in-journalism-building-stronger-unions-in-europe-new-handbook-launched/>

<sup>10</sup> EU progress report for Macedonia 2018 (page 30) <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-the-former-yugoslav-republic-of-macedonia-report.pdf>

- Enrichment of the activities and services that the professional associations offer in order of attracting new members from the younger generation of journalists and media workers
- Continuous organization of workshops and trainings for professional development, but also to familiarize the journalists and media workers with the new skills needed for everyday assignments, especially those connected with the digital technology
- Securing continuous legal aid for journalists and media workers whose labor rights were breached, but also for breached copyright rights