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Integrity in Journalism



**- Conversations
with journalists
from the Western
Balkans countries**

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Instead of a preface



Let us talk about integrity! It was a simple invitation, to which, as it turned out, a simple answer cannot be given. Through conversations with twenty-four journalists from the West Balkan countries, we have tried to answer the questions of what integrity is, what the price of not compromising is, if they have the public interest in their hearts, how the emergence of social networks has changed the fight to keep the standards of reporting high.

We have chosen the journalists based on their work, uncompromising advocacy for professional standards in the hardest of conditions like the war in ex-Yugoslavia, living under the dictatorial or authoritarian regimes or reporting on organized crime. For that reason, this publication does not have classical headlines, they belong to our interlocutors.

On the following pages, you will find all the “usual suspects”, for some of whom you have probably never even heard of. We wanted to give some space to those who are not often present in the public eye, while merging, at the same time, different generations and journalists from different media, working on various issues. Even though they live in six different countries, their problems are the same: lack of transparency and access to public informa-

tion, pressure coming from owners, politics, and large advertisers.

Our goal was to give a small insight into the dilemmas media professionals face in their work, to show the challenges they face and if they are always ready to meet them and whether or not they have the support in their own newsrooms. Have they ever thought they had enough? If yes, why have they stayed? We talked about the eternal issues, like objectivity and activism.

Journalism leaves little space to talk about oneself, because its basic goal is the fight for society's interests, thus inciting the journalist to always put the public first. That is why it is a challenge to talk with the journalists about the problems they face and how they deal with them.

We have fulfilled our intention, more or less and we can say with certainty that the reader will remain in a dilemma until the very last word, because while the questions stayed the same for all of our interlocutors, the answers given differed from an interview to interview.

In this difference lies the allure of the journalism.

Zarka Radoja



Integrity and Authorship in Journalism in the Western Balkans



The timing of the project “Integrity and Authorship in Journalism in the Western Balkans” couldn’t have been worse and better at the same time: in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, many activities could not have been organized in the “normal” circumstances, but this period has also been an experiment in journalist integrity, understandable and visible to all.

At this very moment, journalists from all over the region, and the world, have an opportunity to show if they are here to work in the public interest, regardless of the price, or sit in their newsrooms only to blindly copy the officials’ statements and orders, without giving any critical commentary. The fact that the elections were held in certain countries of the region during the first wave of the COVID-19, has additionally intensified the tensions on the political scene: along the already politically charged situation, there were the COVID-19, statistical data, economy crisis, completely disrupted international relations,

conspiracy theories, street unrests and generally speaking everything that represents a big challenge for reporting and analyzing.

This and similar subjects were dominant in the ten lectures of experienced journalists, media experts and professors and also in the works of the participants: the lectures were held using the ZOOM app, the works were more modest than originally planned, but it could be said that the history was being made while we were discussing it and that this was a drill on the subject of “the new normal”, whatever it may be in the end.

In a room where people unanimously maintain conspiracy of silence, one word of truth sounds like a pistol shot.

Czeslaw Milosz

Although the word “integrity” is mentioned in all the journalism textbooks with many definitions, it boils down to not staying silent about the truth; otherwise a complex term, it is boiled down to what it is in its essence. Journalists with integrity do not stay silent before the autocratic government, crimes, criminals, thefts, nationalism; they do not stay silent before the injustice, force, discrimination and victimization.

In theory, during journalism workshops and in “little schools” this is not brought into question, it practically goes without saying. However, in the field and newsrooms, silence becomes more and more the way both editors and journalists work. The issues that directly concern the citizens are not being discussed, like the growing poverty, state of the hospitals and schools, influence of churches and religious communities on politics, people with disability and their issues, faults of the system of

social protection... all the subjects that entail holding responsible particular people on very specific functions. Keeping silent is not what is the most dangerous. The so-called spinning, “twisting” of issues, distracting the public, “adaptation” of the truth, is far more malignant and widely spread due to the omnipresent internet and social networks. The local politicians rely so much on the spinning that a few very experienced, capable and highly specialized “spin doctors” are actively operating in the region and charging a fortune for their services. Due to this, on numerous occasions, it so happens that when there is a political or corruption scandal, a pedophile chain gets discovered, adultery or a mass brawl happens in a reality show or an XY politician gives a statement or does something so stupid that it can be used to “set the social networks on fire” or play the role of a “red herring”, something everybody will want to get their hands on, thus forgetting what the real, most important issue of the moment is.

On the other hand, adaptation of facts or their incomplete presentation is also widely spread in the media. Although the standards of the profession dictate that the journalists publish EVERYTHING that may influence the attitudes of the public, more often than not, anything that could shed a new light to the story is “conveniently” left out. So, it happens that the media publish comments of the government representatives about the moves and statements of the opposition, without publishing what they were commenting in the first place. Often during a media manhunt, there is not a single word about the person in question, their attitude, their side of the story and their reaction. There is no shortage of instances involving media that only “broadcast” the words of state officials,

war criminals, convicted criminals and their families, with no critical reviews, reservations and no attempt to see the issue from different points of view.

In the Serbian media, in the recent years, a certain practice was established, a practice of “changing focus” from the topic to the person who has initiated it. Those who have uncovered a scandal, initiated a citizen protest, pointed to an irregularity in the media or election process, or in any way raised their voices against the way of the governing of the political elite, can expect with certainty that in the following days the media will drag their private lives out into the public spotlight, use the video archives of their public appearances and edit them to suit their needs, accuse them of an attempted coup, assassination or bringing down the system. This kind of a shooting causes a noise strong enough to “silence” the original topic, while discrediting, targeting and disqualifying the people who initiated it all.

Nothing's off limits: information on someone's children, wives, mistresses, from health records to manipulated photos and videos. All of this leaves deep scars on the public status, credibility and even health of the targeted people, thus breaking the basic human, not only journalist principle - do no harm.

The question, above all others, is: why do journalists do all that? They receive orders, of course, from those who control political or financial power, through spin doctors and editors, but, why do they need this in their lives? What forces someone to consciously lie, adapt and manipulate facts? What makes them, while of sound mind, literally destroy someone's life or at least put it in danger?

Waste no more time arguing what a good man should be. Be one.

**Marcus Aurelius,
Roman emperor and philosopher**

Some journalists claim that they know that they are wrong, that they feel bad and that it is hard for them to go on, but that they “have children”, “have a mortgage”, “do not have another option”. They are all valid arguments, but they cannot justify the consequences of such reporting. Otherwise, even a professional killer, a bank robber or a kidnaper could also claim that all they do is for the children, mortgage or family. There is always an alternative.

The last group consists of journalists who truly believe that what they are doing is right.

Political polarization among journalists is a common theme in the region – the line between activism and journalism has been blurred for a long time and journalists often forget what their job really is. On the other hand, media critics often forget that journalists have a right to have an opinion and depending on the position they occupy in a certain media, they even have a right to publicly defend it, for instance, columnists are paid precisely for expressing it.

However, the problem arises not when journalists transform into activists or protesters on some political gathering (a topic many journalist moral codices treat at length), but into spokespersons for the governing or opposition parties. During the COVID-19 lockdown, at press conferences of the Crisis Headquarters of the Republic of Serbia, even the broader public could see what this means

in practice: the journalists of the pro-regime media daily attacked their colleagues by calling them irresponsible, pro-opposition and rude either during or after the questions they asked. All of this is not a part of their jobs.

It is ungrateful to evaluate anyone's motivation for what they are doing, but here it is hard to resist the conclusion that this group of journalists acts out of belief that what they are doing is in the public interest, that they work for the good of the citizens, that they are on "the right side". In itself, this is not the problem, but it becomes very questionable at the moment when they publically, during a live broadcast or on the covers of magazines, target their colleagues, destroy their lives, when they lie, hide the truth or participate in spin doctors' spectacles.

When it comes to integrity, there is no difference between those who work "for the mortgage" and those who truly believe in what they are doing: namely, they both have forgotten to what end and to whom journalism serves.

Integrity has no need of rules.

Albert Camus, writer

The journalist, who has integrity, or "spine", does not indeed need any rules, written instructions or special courses, just like it is the case with the integrity in general, integrity in life. On the one hand, "rules", namely values are clear and well known; one could even say "ingrained" in anyone who ever wanted to be a journalist. On the other hand, if you need instructions on how not to lie, how not to folder under every pressure, how to work in public interest and for the benefit of the citizens, one

could say that it would be better if you gave up journalism all together.

However, like all the other professions that entail a great responsibility, journalism too has its unwritten rules. Apart from media legislation, there are professional codices dealing with issues that are “outside of the law”, which should not be regarded as instructions, but rather as an aid in the daily work. Namely, the codices do not refer to the “God’s commandments” only – do not lie, do not steal, do not kill, etc. They help journalists understand what should be done in a concrete situation: whether or not to travel abroad at the expense of the state or a private company, to what extent and when to trust a source, which sources should never be trusted, how to approach reporting on children. Individual media, the big and powerful ones, even have their own codices that deal with a larger number of subjects, ranging from national to international and cover a wide variety of topics: if a journalist can accept gifts, who pays the bill when they meet with their source in a restaurant, but also if journalists may participate in political events, what their relationship with investigative authorities should be, how they treat their interlocutors, etc.

Of course, a job of a journalist is such that there are no documents or textbooks that could predict and solve all the challenges they face daily at work. This is especially pertinent for journalists who report from war zones or state of emergency areas. However, in more or less regulated circumstances, experiences of older colleagues or media experts are useful. A long-term experience in working with journalists in Serbia has shown that there are still “gray areas”, where provisions of the Codex for

Journalists can help them keep their integrity as well as the integrity of the media they work for.

For example, this refers to a provision that warns journalists against abusing the mental and physical status of the individuals they talk to, who are not, in the majority of cases, conscious of the power of the media and the long-term consequences their appearance in the media may provoke. This is extremely important, since a journalist of integrity protects above all “small”, “ordinary” people. Public personalities are mostly conscious of the media influence and they have the “defense” mechanisms for them, unlike someone who finds himself eye to eye with the media machinery, often due to unfortunate circumstances.

The Codex of Journalists of Serbia and many others worldwide, recommend to journalists not to take statements from people who have just lost or buried someone close to them, from people who are not conscious of the criminal act they have just committed, those with mental issues that prevent them from understanding the meaning of their actions, people under the influence of intoxicants... all these situations are unfortunately still happening mostly to those who do not know how to act, first of all because they are pressured by the editors looking for “an exclusive”, but also because they often find themselves in moral turmoil.

Another area where the Codex proved itself useful is the protection of privacy, especially of children and “ordinary” people. Of course, many scientific papers have been written on this topic, many courts have dealt with this issue that becomes more and more relevant. Codices have not given the last word on privacy, but they can represent a sort of “an emergency service” to a journalist who

wishes to report without crossing the red line of what is morally and professionally acceptable.

Breaches of professional codices most often happen regarding the assumption of someone's innocence, the victim's right of dignity, unlabeled PR texts – areas in which journalists easily change the current practice when they are explained clearly what the consequences are and how they can report accurately and with precision, but without any serious penalty for those they are reporting about.

The topic almost all of the world codices have left incomplete is the already mentioned political identification of journalists and more importantly political identification and open political engagement of the media. Some codices, and most of the codices of the countries of the Western Balkans, dictate that the media are not allowed to subdue the public interest to the political and financial ones. However, the question remains where the line is, how “ordinary” journalists can know if they were politically manipulated and how far they can go when representing their political opinions.

In looking for people to hire, you look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. And if you don't have the first, the other two will kill you. If you hire somebody without integrity, you really want them to be dumb and lazy.

Warren Buffett, businessman

About these and other numerous aspects of journalistic integrity, the participants in this project had an opportunity to talk to media experts, scientists and journalists:

Dr Jelena Surculija Milojevic, professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade

Nemanja Marinovic, executive director of the Social Margin Center and coordinator at the School of Media Literacy

Hilma Unkic, journalist and coordinator at the Media Center in Sarajevo

Jaksa Scekcic, TV Sky East European Bureau chief and Reuters producer

Valbona Kurti, editor in chief of the program “Stop”, TV Klan from Tirana

Aleksandar Vasovic, Reuters correspondent and longtime war reporter

Demir Mekic, coach, sociologist and human rights practitioner

Mihailo Jovovic, editor in chief and program editor of “Vijesti” from Podgorica

Besa Luci, editor at Kosovo 2.0 from Pristina

Ana Petruceva, BIRN from Skopje

The lectures were held through the ZOOM app, which certainly is not the best, but currently is the only replacement for the real and “normal” lectures. However, since our “new normal” was being made simultaneously with this project, even when it comes to the journalistic integrity, one could say that each sentence and each question had a special weight and importance. And questions were many, and so were the comments, curiosities, interests for practical experiences, opportunities for living and making a living as a journalist.

In their texts and video coverage, the participants focused on different topics: ranging from dyslexia in children,

over COVID-19 miracle cures, to the very concept of the journalistic integrity. If the circumstances had been different, we could have expected from the participants more complex journalistic forms, but the praiseworthy fact is that the participants did not give up despite the conditions and that during the state of emergency in the whole of Europe, a group of young journalists worked hard on their own development, preparing for a new era that is ahead of us.

Allow yourself to think only those thoughts that match your principles and can bear the bright light of day. Day by day, your choices, your thoughts, your actions fashion the person you become. Your integrity determines your destiny.

Heraclitus, Ancient Greek philosopher

> Branka Mihajlovic

A journalist since 1971, when she started at Radio Television Belgrade. She was one of the employees who were banned from entering that media outlet in 1993. From 1995 to 2006 she worked as a journalist for Radio Free Europe in Prague, and from 2006 in their Belgrade office.



I have spent my whole career as a journalist in electronic media, television, and radio, and eventually internet. So, when I first started a long time ago, in 1971, there was a single, national television – TV Beograd (RTB) with its two channels. Channel 2 was showing news from other TV centers in SFR Yugoslavia and some of their programs. News at 8 p.m. was the central information show, the less official Evening news towards the end of the program, and the copyrighted television show “24 hours” on Channel 2. My first editorial was the experimental Beogradski program (Belgrade program). Very soon I moved to the internal section of the informative program. Apart from the daily informative shows, they broadcasted debate and talk shows, but formed within “given topics and people”.

As a young journalist, I was soon exposed to the typical “purges” in the media, which always follow political purges after a political twist. This was a liberal purge that started with Marko Nikezic and Latinka Perovic. After they had been removed, a similar process happened in

Television Belgrade. Editorial board members, executives, news editors were fired... A decade and a half later, I would be a part of another such process after the 8th Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia in 1987.

That story is a good illustration of the media position at the time. They were the extended arm of the government, the state media outlets, as they were called then.

The most common problems in today's journalism

How to recognize fake news

How a journalist can recognize spinning, because we often have infiltrating topics in order to distract the attention from the real problems. Journalists deal with things that aren't even news, information or a topic.

How to keep a decent narrative, how not to reciprocate intolerant speech, hate speech

How to follow the golden rule of two sides when the government boycotts some media outlets

Television more so than the printed media. In fact, there was a limited space for the media. Forbidden topics and forbidden people. I would say that it was decent, slightly boring journalism, the messages were read between the lines. However, if the management in politics was less dogmatic, freedom of the media was bigger. If the editorial offices were braver, those limits were pushed.

That was happening in the first half of the '80s. A different atmosphere could be sensed, there was more freedom in writing, commenting, almost all topics were started, a part of what was ideological taboo. Formerly forbidden people started to show up in the media and formerly

forbidden topics were being opened. In the public media outlet, it was impossible to call the critics of the government, like Vesna Pesic, lawyer Srdja Popovic, director

Zivojin Pavlovic, or outlawed professors, we just couldn't go there. That began in the '80s. It is interesting that on Channel 3, Milorad Vucelic, who would later be in charge of the television in the darkest period of warmongering journalism, started to bring in dissidents, from Milovan Djilas to the group of professors who were removed during the liberal period. I would later realize that it was because someone in the Central Committee said: "Come on, loosen up a bit." There was quality journalism, but it was restricted to certain limits.

Freedom was being won. Authorship and investigative journalism were nourished... The rules of the profession were followed. Television Belgrade was competing with Television Zagreb, Television Sarajevo. At that time there were great names in journalism, not only in foreign affairs and cultural topics, but also in the internal politics. Those were the journalists breaking the given limits. Some journalists prematurely messed up with political pluralism. Foreign affairs journalists in leading newspapers, such as daily newspaper Politika, were as good as diplomats representing Yugoslavia.

In Serbia, things loosened up, and it was considered a liberal environment until Slobodan Milosevic showed up. Then, the so-called national topic started opening, graves started opening, bones were being dug out and carried around, people started happening, preparing for the country separation and wars. Instead of professional

On social networks

On one hand, they brought a technological step forward. They have opened the space so much that it is difficult to hide anything today. On the other hand, they've become a lethal weapon of propaganda, especially when it comes to targeting people and hate speech.

journalism, the most shameful period of so-called “patriotic journalism” began.

And everything went to hell.

During the '90s, editorial offices were “cleaned” from unpatriotic journalists and authors with unwanted names and surnames (the list of unsuitable journalists of RTB was read in prime time by the leader of Serbian Radical Party, and today the convict of the Hague Tribunal, Vojislav Seselj), independent media outlets were shut down (Radio B92, Studio B), daily newspaper Borba was taken over. So, the media space was rid of everyone who wasn't in the warmongering game. The response of those who refused all that was forming new institutions and some new media outlets. Independent Union of RTB was formed, but we, the Independent union Executive board members, were deprived of our passes in 1993 and we were no longer enter the building.

We were not informed in writing or otherwise that we were sent on compulsory leave, which was a first step towards the final termination. For most of us. Simply, when we came to work, I think it was a Monday, the entrance to the building was blocked, the security took our passes, and informed us that we were on compulsory leave. There was a commotion at the entrance of Takovska 10. Our co-workers who weren't on the list passed us by without asking a question. We, the ones on the list, couldn't even get in to take our belongings from the office. That's a brutal way to “clean” a media outlet from the unwanted ones, including many famous TV authors. Instead of Borba, Nasa borba (Our battle), then Danas (Today, a daily newspaper), Beta News Agency, independent TV production WIN, weekly newspaper Vreme, a parallel independent association of journalists NUNS,

a parallel independent Media Center, Belgrade Circle of independent intellectuals, a parallel association of writers...

The new media did not reach far, but the very existence was significant in an overall shameless warmongering journalism. In the atmosphere where every anti-war stance was declared to be a treason, journalists were physically threatened. Some even paid the refusal to play war games with their lives. A terrifying time for all those who weren't a part of the nationalist war madness.

Today, I am sure of it, it is very hard for young journalists, because the majority of the media on the market is either tabloid to the point of not being proper media and its employees cannot be called journalists, or less tabloid, but completely serving to politically and economically powerful people who are often linked to the mafia. However, there are editorial offices offering possibilities for young people to work professionally. If they opt for a lower paying, but honorable job, they can expect fulfillment for keeping their

On public interest

When it comes to the media, the public interest is for the citizens to be informed correctly, in a timely manner, truthfully about what is guaranteed by the Constitution and the Law. It is broken every step of the way. As Predrag Lucic, the journalist from Split's Feral Tribune once said, journalism became the profession of serving the centers of political and economic power, and that is not the public interest. Most of the media outlets under the government's wing was bought in various ways and literally by privatization and private media outlets are mostly serving the government for financial gain. Those are the media outlets standing in line to apply for the state and party budget. They are united in creating a cult of the leader. That is not public interest, yet that is what we live in.

integrity, but only if they are ready to stay marginalized and often stigmatized. Both them personally and the media outlets they work for. Being honorable in dishonorable times comes with a price. One should be prepared for that. But the examples of some editorial offices show that there are such young people gaining professional education at, for example, Journalism and Communication department of the Faculty of Political Sciences.

Even in this media darkness and the mess the journalists live and still work in, there are journalists I commend for keeping their integrity and refuse to break professional code. That is the young and middle generation, I bow to them. I think that, if we don't count the wartime of the '90s, it has never been harder for journalists than it is today, in this all-consuming mud that the media are today, which is mainly caused by the social circumstances.

Serbian society has collapsed in every aspect. Look at what every profession is going through. Let's look at who's representing our country, who the new US ambassador is (author's comment: Marko Djuric, former director of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija), what kind of qualifications and image we send for the world to see. Look who our state-owned enterprises executives are, what happened to the medical profession during the COVID-19 pandemic, how professions collapsed when it comes to crisis response team leading the fight against the disease caused by the virus, and otherwise. In such an environment, it is hard for journalists as well, and when you don't have a society with a value system, work ethics, no wonder journalists lose their professional and human integrity. We are a part of a completely collapsed society. In April 2014, I entered the television premises in Takovska for the first time after 1993. That was also the

last time. We were symbolically given our passes back, the ones they took away in 1993. I wasn't sure if that act meant that the "patriotic journalism" wouldn't happen again. Still, there was some hope. I felt good for a moment. But only for a moment. Our refusing to comply is still not a respectable example, even today. And only that would make sense. My pass is somewhere in one of my drawers. No idea which one.

> Nidzara Ahmetasevic

During over two decades of working as a journalist, she has published in numerous media outlets in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the region, and in the international media outlets, such as The New Yorker, The Guardian, The Times, Al Jazeera English. She is an independent researcher with a focus on the development of the media, hate speech, facing the past, and migrations. Winner of numerous international awards for her work. Holding the doctorate from the University of Gratz in the field of media development in the postwar countries.



> What is the situation with the integrity in the media in BiH?

It is substantially fading. There are still some journalists who are fighting, trying, however keeping the integrity in an environment such as BiH is very difficult. The colleagues are less prepared to think about that as something that matters. Now the struggle for survival and existence becomes primal.

> When you say “the environment in BiH” what do you refer to exactly?

I refer to a total occupation of the media. I could hardly think of free media outlets today. Free journalists yes, but free media outlets in BiH, hardly. The majority are associated with certain political parties, or with various economic interest groups, or they depend on donators who

Journalism today

I still believe that this is a very important profession.

We are constantly on the front lines. The empty idea of objectivity killed what should have been true journalism. The problem is that the journalists are distancing from the streets and becoming close to the establishment. That's just wrong. We can't only sit with the establishment and not be with the people because then we won't know what's in the public interest, nor will we be able to ask the right questions.

often act like they are entitled to interfere with what the media do under the excuse of creating the freedom of the media. Surviving in such an environment is genuinely difficult, and I think that numerous colleagues are giving up.

> What is the price of that survival?

I paid the price by leaving the domestic media. I cooperate with some of them occasionally, and those are a small independent oasis, but with the others, I rarely collaborate since I don't understand what they are doing, or I don't want to be a part of it. The problem is that we have journalists' associations that

are corrupted and don't work in the journalist's interests. We don't have a union of journalists. The price that an individual journalist has to pay is to become very lonely in your job, and you can't rely on your own account when you need solidarity. That's very sad. There are instances when other media outlets or associations place you in a situation to feel threatened and your job is made more difficult.

> When you say difficult, what are the problems you encounter while doing your job?

There is not enough transparency in the work of the institutions. In my case, a large number of institutions

don't even want to communicate with me due to what I write and speak publicly. Over the last few years, I have been dealing with the issue of migrations and people on the move, and if I ask some questions, I never receive any answers from the institutions.

Great pressure is exerted from the security structures towards the media, and I often feel like someone from the police is seated at the newsroom. Very similar pressure is coming from a large number of international organizations in BiH. You will receive from them only what they want you to receive, very little or nothing of the public interest. The problem that remains is the involvement of the police and security structures which, under the shadow of giving exclusive information, let dangerous propaganda into the air. On the other hand, that's in fact the issue of the lack of professionalism since a professional media outlet can't allow losing its credibility with the public in such way.

> Why did you stop working for the domestic media?

I still collaborate with some that I consider neutral. There are a lot of such elements. At certain points, I started to wonder who my editor was. I worked for some media outlets while reading pure propaganda they spread. The pressure is enormous. A lot of colleagues are giving up. We are all giving up. We have no protection whatsoever. If you discover something of public interest, you become a target. I was lucky to work with the editors who were willing to protect their journalists, and again there were so many obstacles. I was losing my freedom and myself while trying to understand what the public interest was in all that. I maybe didn't manage very well, and I realized

that it would suit me better to work with a media outlet in the region, an international one, which would give me more possibilities and freedom, where I would be sure that my editor is led by the public interest and professional standards. Ethics vanished from journalism in BiH, but also from the educational system. It became very hard for me to respond to all those challenges while defying the profession that I learned and strived to master.

> The question of the editor's responsibility is the one frequently asked. Journalists are aware of it, they know how many levels their work has to pass in the newsroom before being published, but what's with the public? Our name and surname, despite everything, remain first on the line for criticizing.

I am very lucky to work for the online magazine Kosovo 2.0, where the editor still does his job, where there is the editorial board, where decisions are jointly made, and that's what I was missing in BiH. Journalism is a team effort. That's how a magazine is created. I am currently the regional editor for K2.0 and I spend more time working with the journalists on their pieces, than I do for writing my own, but that's a normal process. When I was submitting articles to The New Yorker or The Guardian, I did the same with the editors. That's the part of the process that every journalist has to go through. All journalists in the world must work with editors. You may make a trivial mistake, someone always has to be there with you in that process.

Equally, when I was starting, I was lucky to have great editors – from Ozren Kebo, Nenad Pejić, to Senad Avdić – who gave me their patience, who really taught us, and who were patient enough to teach me. I don't see that

today. When you read texts in the majority of media in BiH, you see the holes, you see that the editor did nothing there.

> Has anything else changed from the time you started doing this job until today?

The profession has been devalued. I come from a journalist family and I know how appreciated this profession was, how my mother and her colleagues were appreciated, their work was important. Today, when I say that I am a journalist people often see me as an enemy, they see someone to be afraid of, but I also understand why. I personally met some colleagues, people working in this profession, who use methods that they shouldn't, who use media as a means of blackmail. We are all at a loss because of that. It's irrelevant that I will never do that since it's enough for one of us to do it, and we all will carry that burden. That makes it so much harder to gather information and collect the stories, and even when you write your story, people tend to trust you less.

You see journalists who are journalists one day, and another day they are in a political party, and then they are journalists again. Just like you have journalists who do PR for a moment, then they are journalists, and it's logical that people stopped trusting. They don't under-

On social networks

The way they are used is sometimes painfully primitive, and sometimes even dangerous. All persecutions and assaults directed at the individuals are being amplified with the social media, partly by spreading all sorts of information, often unverified, partly by commenting. In BiH, the majority of editors still claim that they have no way of controlling the comments, and they use that as an excuse for allowing the toughest and worst possible, even the threats, directed towards individuals from various domains of life.

stand what position you are speaking from. It is harder for people today to decide to give a piece of information “off the record” than it was before, because they are scared, and they have all the right to be scared. I am not sure how much I’d trust many journalists from the region myself, since I don’t know who they are working for.

> What was the most challenging period so far?

It was the beginning of the collaboration with the international media, when as a young journalist in a small, undeveloped country, I decided to try myself in a foreign language, in an environment a lot more professional than the one I had worked in. That was really a great challenge for me. I was happy when I got the chance to learn while working with big international media outlets and journalists. It is a big challenge, even when you don’t directly work, just to be with them out in the field and to watch some of them working, such as Ed Vulliamy, a journalist in the British Observer, who proved the existence of the concentration camps in BiH during the war. That was a great learning experience. The most valuable experience for me was to be with him and with other teams.

It took me a lot of courage to offer my piece to The New Yorker. It is a big deal even for a journalist in the USA, let alone me. For me, it was a big deal just to visit their offices, and when they accepted my piece that was a big challenge, and I am so proud of myself that I encouraged myself to do that.

> When you say that you learned a lot from Ed Vulliamy, what specifically is the difference?

Preparation for the article. It is a long process. Working in the field, how you approach people, how you talk to them to get the information, how to become a part of the group

while not being a part of the group, since you have to keep your distance. For me, there is no objectivity. That's why Ed was important to me. Ed spoke freely about some things, he openly chose sides. I long doubted that since journalists in BiH suddenly became extremely "professional" and told me that's not how it's done, you can't report from a protest while walking with the protesters, you can't write about migrants like that, you are biased because you go out and give bread to a hungry migrant, etc. For me, that's unacceptable, and I talked a lot about that with Ed. I asked him if I could do that, asked him how to continue doing that while remaining professional, and he helped me. He told me that the preparation is the most important. If I worked on a piece about plenums in BiH, I first had to sit down and learn what plenum was in the first place, then I spent hours and hours talking to people, not writing, but trying to understand what drove them out to the streets, to realize why I wanted to be there with them, and not standing with my colleagues – away, filming. I think that I found better stories, but I wasn't afraid to choose that side. I learned that from numerous journalists who covered the war in BiH – when you see good and evil, if you don't side with the good, you are on the evil's side. I am not ready to do that. If I see people struggling for their lives and standing on the streets for that cause, if they give me arguments, I see the public interest. In 2014 those people needed journalists to walk with them and tell their stories. That's what Ed was doing during the war in BiH, and what he taught me – get in the crowd, be the crowd, write, but stick to the professional standards. Always check the other side of the story, people have to see the other side to be able to decide what is evil and what is good.

On public interest

Every society should determine what its public interest is. I think that that's completely lost in BiH.

I am not sure that I could find media outlets that are truly guided by the public interest in what they do. The saddest thing is that the public broadcasting networks are not guided by the public interest, and even sadder is that the society doesn't even talk about it. If we are not unified about what the public interest is, then I don't know what the media are doing. That could be clearly seen during the pandemic.

In BiH, and that's unfortunately not the case only with this country, but we are talking about BiH now, people still don't understand why they have to wear masks since the media never fully explained that to them. As a journalist, I want to know what a patient's journey looks like, and what the conditions in which they are being treated are. That is the public interest. The media were never concerned with that. Instead, they were concerned with the issues that distracted from everything, and for which I am not sure whether they are the public interest. Maybe they are? Maybe the public interest of the citizens of BiH is to be ignorant.

It is similar with the refugees and migrants. I can't allow myself to act objectively and unbiased, while on the other side we have violence, closed borders, starving people, horror, and complete violation of human rights. I think that it's the public interest to point to that, to show that human rights are being violated there. I can see that only from the immediate vicinity. Ed taught me that. Ask questions, get inside, ask thousands of questions, and then work. He taught me to be a freethinking journalist.

> You mentioned objectivity and neutrality. We are taught that a journalist must be objective. What does it mean to be objective in critical situations?

That idea has been rejected. Journalists are not aliens, they can't reach that level of objectivity. We are biased, thinking beings. We may have five, six sides, but when we write we put our-

selves into our work. I find it funny when my colleagues speak about objectivity. When we read famous media, we see that that idea had been rejected. It's one thing to stick to the professional norms. I can't write a piece about someone beating the refugees at the Croatian border without asking some questions to the police. However, when they respond that it's not true, I can't just say ok, there it is, they say that it's not true, and that's it, which is what many of my colleagues do. I can't do that since a beaten man is standing in front of me and I have to face his wounds with the words of the police, and I have to show that to the public since the public pays that police officer. I have to ask questions, write a piece so that a person who reads that piece would pose many questions for themselves. I can't provide answers, but I can make space for questions and I can make the people ask the questions themselves. That is the public interest – give me enough information so that later I could search myself. I will give you the picture of a beaten man, I will check five times whether he had been really beaten or something else happened to him. But you have to believe that I checked that. I can't allow a lie to myself. I like to talk about ethics and professionalism more than I like to talk about objectivity because I believe that, while talking about false objectivity, we neglected professionalism and ethics. Ethics is the key and it constantly leads us to questioning.

> Is there any situation in which you could do differently?

There are probably a million. I could have done everything differently, but I tried to do that as best as I could in a given moment. To do and make mistakes is normal. In the beginning, it was hard for me to work with people who survived war crimes. That conversation can

become deep, you cross a sort of boundary, if I may call it that, and you become too close with some people. I've learned, and I no longer write about people I became close with, but that was the hardest lesson for me to learn.

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I frequently work with people who survived serious traumas, I want to capture their story, which means that I have to dig deep, to ask very intimate things. I worked a lot with women who were raped during the war. You get yourself in a situation that a woman is telling you what happened to her for the first time. I had a woman who had never told what happened to her to anyone until then. I managed to find the way. I couldn't just get up after that conversation and be some journalist and walk away. We connected at a very deep level. I wrote a piece about her, but I don't do that anymore today. I still write down their stories and hope to turn them into a book since they want their stories to be told, but those aren't journalistic formats. I have to work with other formats.

I personally paid the price of that intimacy since it's very difficult to deal with some of those things. One witness before the court asked me to be with her while she testified, which was extremely hard for me. I didn't know what to do but I stood by her side. I don't even know what my role in that situation was, but I hope that it was easier for her while she held my hand during her testimony. I don't do that anymore. When I become close with someone on that level, I do it only if that person wants me to turn that into a story, but I would rather leave that as a piece of

oral history. I wouldn't turn it into a piece, putting in the other side of the story. There is no other side to that story. I learned another format and another approach, and I learned another way to deal with myself.

My first big piece was for the Bosnian magazine Dani. I was already a journalist, but that was my first big piece was about mass graves. I was 19. From the start, from the early days of my career, I have been dealing with difficult issues. There were a lot of challenges like when to take a photograph, whether or not to touch a person you are talking to, is it ok to cry? I cry since I am primarily human and don't see a reason to hide my emotions. I think it's rude to just sit across someone with a cold expression on my face, while that person is telling me such big and important stories. I would be extremely angry if I were telling a deeply intimate story to someone who was looking at me and saying: "Yes, ok, and then what?" That really changed my writing style and lead me to something that isn't journalism, but more essayistic writing. It's the process of constant learning and putting yourself into very challenging situations.

> A not very popular segment is how we deal with ourselves. Have you ever received any instructions or at least advice, from a newsroom or an editor, regarding how to deal with everything inside you when you return from traumatic events such as discovering of mass graves? How do you deal with that trauma?


Yes, by writing. I process my trauma through writing. For a long time, I worked with the editor Senad Avdić, who they say is difficult to work with. He is a good editor who stands by his journalist. I went through some of the most difficult phases with him, and he knew when to give me

time to process inside myself everything that I brought from the field, and to let me write a piece without many interventions, to transfer my emotions into that piece. I am forever grateful for that. I remember the first time I went to a collective funeral (of people killed in the 1995 genocide) in Srebrenica, it was very hard. I think that it's hard for me to think about that even today.

I can still hear the sound of soil falling onto the empty coffins which contained only remains of bodies, sometimes only one small bone. There were several hundreds of those coffins and the soil was pounding simultaneously on all of them. You hear that, it's echoing through Potocari. Every lump of soil onto the empty coffin hurts. I was broken into pieces when I returned to Sarajevo. I couldn't do anything. I didn't know what to do with myself. Is there anything else after that? At that moment Senad let me be. For two days I didn't do anything, I just stared, he was with me, following me, came every now and then to see if I was ok. When I asked him how I would write about this, he said just sit down and write it. And it came out of me. He published that piece, flooded with emotions, I have a feeling that from that piece you could hear the soil pounding on those empty coffins. He let me skip coming to the newsroom every day after such and similar events because he knew that I needed some distance. That meant so much me.

> Dragan Bursac

Philosophy professor, columnist and journalist. He worked as a journalist for the Radio Banjaluka and the portal BUKA. He publishes his columns on a few Bosnian-Herzegovinian and regional portals. He is the recipient of an array of awards, including the European Press Prize Opinion Award with 'The third shooting of the boy Petar from Konjic' published on the Al Jazeera Balkans.



> Between reporting on a daily basis and opinion journalism, you have chosen opinion journalism. Why?

In a way, column gives me a possibility to see a situation from “above”. It gives you a distance, but demands a constant mental engagement and attitude. Simply put, it is my contemplation on reality. At the same time, it is an empire of freedom, limited, of course, by my vocabulary, knowledge and talent, which I cannot transcend, but I can always improve myself. Honestly, I have to admit, that all the newsrooms have given me, until now, the freedom to think and write. More precisely, there were no editorial interventions or censorship. Concerning influencing, I think that a people create influence with their work, and this goes for journalism and opinion journalism subgroup as well. If you are good, you will be recognized no matter what you do and vice versa. In the end, I cannot be 100% focused on every media event. First of all, it's not possible, and second, it simply burns you up. This way, I'm comfortable to choose my own cup of tea and work

on it. Unfortunately or luckily, we live in an area where you have an abundance of themes and where the initial inspiration is in fact not needed.

On integrity

Integrity is an issue of each individual. It's not an issue of media, plural, but rather of each person, and by extension of each media worker. Integrity is an essential part of a personality, so we can say that there are people in any line of work who have it, in journalism too, and then there are those who don't. In journalism in BiH, I can say that few are the journalists who have it.

> How big of a challenge is working on post-conflict issues in the society that has not yet faced its past?

The greatest challenge is how to approach a topic, because topics most often consist of people who are alive, but also dead or missing. So, it's a very sensitive field, where you involve the most delicate feelings of direct participants of certain events, their families, their micro-surroundings and going further in concentric circles to the Balkans, Europe and the world. In that situation, you have to choose

your words carefully. Not because of self-censorship, but because of the tremendous responsibility. Everything I said is a huge challenge, the greatest of all. The end presentation to the so-called wide range of users or auditorium, whatever that meant, is the most painless. The work itself on the story with witnesses and interlocutors or in archives with archivists represents the real challenge in every sense of the word.

> Because of the issues you work on, mostly connected to nationalism, human rights, the war and its consequences, you are often a target for

threats on social media and in real life. What is your experience with the institutions?

Diverse. I have a different experience with different institutions and people who work there. For instance, apart from the Association of BiH Journalists, I have the best cooperation, and this may surprise many, with the Ministry of the Interior in Banja Luka. These people are really doing their job well. Especially if you can see the conditions they work in. Technically speaking, it's the late eighties with the complete absence of technique and technology. And these people, working under these conditions, more precisely in the Center of public security Banja Luka, have solved the cases, found and arrested almost all those responsible for my death threats. According to my calculations, there were 13 of them and that is very important for the rest of the story.

Out of these 13 people, I have "forgiven" one, meaning that I said that I won't press any charges, one was convicted and the 11 rest have never answered legally. So, judiciary and prosecution are the real black holes that suck everything in and, as a rule, they do not let the justice out.

> What are the most common problems you face while doing your work professionally?

Apart from death threats I don't see any bigger problems. I waste my time; I go to the Ministry of the Interior, report these things, people destroy my furniture, my car, threaten me, and throw me out of premises. These are the things that make you feel isolated and affect you the most as a physical, biological being. When you get used to it, you don't even notice other things. There are setups, bots, liars who use your first and last name for some gain on

On public interest

In our line of work it is the truth. However, if one writes the truth, very often it is not in the public interest in these Balkan environments. And then there's an interpersonal conflict between those who do their jobs and editors, who wouldn't want them to do their jobs (tell the truth). There are problems there. I wouldn't know what the public interest is in BiH. Is it the interest of the elites, financial and political oligarchs or the universal good that got lost? We, the so called public workers do not know ourselves what the public interest is. If it is to bear witness to the truth, to write about the truth and deal with the truth, one often notices that it is feasible, but it's an ideal and does not correspond to the situation in the field. In the field, there are marriages between the public opinion and media policy creators, which are not compatible with the public interest in the narrow sense.

media and on social networks. But when you face the worst things, then you don't notice any of it. It's a wide range, you can find anything here.

> Do you feel safe? Were there any situations when you had to leave town you live in?

Looking at the police and prosecution offices, I don't feel the least bit safe or less insecure. Threats are still there, but I have to write without introducing self-censorship into my articles. It goes without saying that if things got done, first and foremost in the judiciary system, I am convinced that I would be targeted considerably less and my job would be significantly easier.

People get scared sometimes and wonder, but they have to have support from the family and a wider community in order to be able to do their work. If they cave in to these pressures, they inevitably fall into self-censorship and it defeats the purpose. On the other hand, it can grow into paranoia and finding reasons

for fear where there is none. It's about mental gymnastics, for a man to be able to strike a balance between everything. These pressures make your work difficult, for sure. They are like unwanted pets, like gremlins that keep fussing at your feet, not letting you move. It's a waste of time.

Then, there's conscious and subconscious notion of how this affects your family, your micro-community, environment. Those are the things you deal with, but it is recommended that you set all that aside when you are working on your stories. Unfortunately or fortunately, one gets used to these things.

> With all these pressures, is the job worth it?

I don't see things that way. Journalism isn't a calling, it's your life. It's not something that is limited by working hours. You are born, stumble upon it, get hooked and live that life.

Consequently, if you are a real journalist, you can't just get up and say: "This isn't worth it, off I go to some PR service or into politics", at least I think so. In fact, those people were never real journalists and I envy them sometimes. It won't ever happen to me, not because I'm an ethical person, but because I'm not god in anything else but this.

Is this job worth it? At the end of the day, at the end of the story, at the end of the observation – yes it is!

> How difficult is it to preserve professional integrity in such circumstances?

I think it's not difficult. It depends on a person. For decades, people have been using pressure as an excuse

to justify their lack of integrity, which is an inversion of arguments. If you have integrity, there's no one who could pressure you. And vice versa, if you don't have it, you find thousands of reasons why you don't have it.

> Despite all, what is keeping you in journalism?

I mentioned it somewhere before. I'm not good at anything else. And also, this is the world of wonderful people, some of whom I have met and others I am yet to meet. And then there's the planet Earth, which is like your backyard when you're doing your job well. There are travels, new worlds, cultures... Now I sound like a combination of a model and a football player, but yes, that is the beauty of journalism. Along with that, there's inner peace you have when you know that you're doing something good and when you are witnessing the truth despite the storms. It somehow calms you down.

> Lindita Cela

Lindita Cela works for the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project – OCCRP. She used to work for the BIRN and Balkan Insight. She is the recipient of several international awards for investigative journalism as well as the commendation from UN Women for gender equality and empowerment of women for the project “Making a Killing” at the global conference on investigative journalism in Johannesburg.



■ On integrity

Journalists in Albanian media work from morning till night and I have to say that in the public services and in the mainstream media alike, they all work in difficult conditions. A great number of journalists in Albania has no insurance. They work for a salary that is in most cases below the average salary of their colleagues, even those in the Balkans. The most important is that Albanian journalists do not have the freedom to report. They are mostly coerced into self-censorship, due to a relationship between the publishers/media owners and the government that controls almost all the media. If we address this issue from this point of view, I think that we need to talk about the integrity of the media, their owners and of the government itself and not about the integrity of the media workers. We find ourselves in a vicious circle, where, in the last four to five years, the government has financially supported the media owners through tenders and ads, thus controlling them. Unfortunately, at this moment we

cannot talk about integrity of the journalists and whether the media are free in Albania. This is the most important thing I wanted to point out.

To earn a salary, journalists have turned themselves into government spokespersons or mere conveyors of information received from the government, without giving any context or further research. At this moment we do not have information; we do not have the journalists who do their jobs. On the contrary, due to the connection between the media owners and certain ministries or the government, we have the journalists who are forced to be mere conveyors of their propaganda. Journalists want to go further than a piece of news or refuse to report in a way that is reduced to copying statements of the government, they will immediately face the possibility of losing a job. That is why I will repeat that I believe that we don't need to talk about the integrity of journalists. The problem is on higher levels. We need to talk about the government that has a complete control over journalists through media owners, while, on the other hand, blocking the information it is obliged to give. When it happens that the media publish professionally done stories of a good quality, the government and especially the prime minister accuse them of spreading lies and call them "garbage".

Fake news is broadcasted night and day on the prime minister's online channel – ERTV. He is the only prime minister in the region, according to my knowledge, who has his own Facebook channel where he broadcasts government meetings, which the media use as a source of information. Nobody checks the data they give or their trustworthiness. On the other hand, even though it is broadcasted over social media, it is obvious that the production is of good quality. In Albania, the freedom of

media is questionable. We have a lot of media outlets, but we don't have journalism. We have a lot of journalists, but they do not do their jobs because of the government pressures.

Apart from self-censorship, Albanian journalists lack training, which is obvious in the way they work. Unfortunately, compared to the situation until a few years ago, they have lost the awareness that they should confirm information from at least two sources. In my view, the reason for this is not because they do not want to or because they do not know how to do their jobs, but rather because they are pressured to convey the statements only. I have a big problem with the so – called online media that lack almost in everything – from basic standards of the Albanian language, to publishing news that are unconfirmed and not in the public interest.

■ On the lack of trust

Unfortunately, in the past years, due to the propaganda of the government that has been targeting the media, people are losing trust in us. Even though I have never published fake news or disinformation, I spend a lot of time convincing people I meet or contact for the first time to get information, that they can trust me, by telling them that the best way to change something in this country is to blow the cover of corruption, of the deals that get made

What is the public interest?

Let's us ask a question how our money is spent. All of us in a democratic country pay the taxes and we definitely have to know how it is being used. A journalist should check out, in the best scenario uncover the corruption, that is what went wrong in the initial agreement. That is where the journalism differs from the propaganda.

in the Albanian institutions, and that the punishing of the corruption is the only way for us to be a democratic country. Earlier, for instance four years ago, I didn't spend time convincing people to tell me their story. At this moment there is uncertainty and I see that the government propaganda to label journalists as "garbage" has worked. Only after I manage to convince people with my body of work, we can talk about an interview or the issues we need to address. That is a bad sign.

■ On threats

At this time, I work for an organization that is focused on investigating organized crime and corruption, and corruption always happens, of course, on the highest levels. As a consequence, I often get threats. I wouldn't call it a direct "We will kill you" threat, it is much more sophisticated. It's either an offer of money or going through personal contacts to stop me. And this happens on almost every story I work on. Of course, after each threat, you are afraid to leave your house for two, three days, but this is normal for me. The moment I get them, I know that I am on the right path. For me, it's a signal that I'm doing my job well. I'm not saying that the journalists need these situations, but when you find yourself faced with them, you have to find the strength and understand that you are on your way to write a good story.

■ On journalism

From the fifteen – year long experience, I can say that the challenges that journalism is facing have changed according to the political events and situation in the Albanian media. We mustn't forget that the country has faced chaotic situations, like the war in Kosovo, the civil war that was replaced the political corruption and organized

crime. Reporting on these crimes is certainly a challenge for any journalist and I think that there were journalists who managed to their jobs professionally. However, the challenge every Albanian journalist faces today is public credibility. We have a government that is not focused on transparency in its work, but rather on denigration of journalists and on the control of mass media.

“A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself”, said Joseph Pulitzer and I think that that is the real image of the media in Albania. Correct reporting, above all in the public interest, is a great challenge for every journalist today. However, despite everything I go through because of my work, I am not about to give my profession up. Though we must not forget that journalists are human too, facing crises, disappointments and doubts. The better they do their work, the greater are the confrontations with the reality of a corrupt country. By that I refer to the moments when I said “It’s enough! I can’t go on!” or “I have the right to live like anyone else!”, but those were the words addressed to friends, sometimes even to myself to be able to explain that what I do is right, that there are people who are worthy of support and that I am not alone on this mission. It is enough to start another investigation and the doubts are gone. You start to focus on what you do better, the most beautiful profession in the world.

> Ivan Cadjenovic

*A long-time journalist of Vijesti daily of Podgorica.
Currently writing for the Monitor weekly
and PCNEN portal.*

THE RIGHT OF DISSENT: I had started practicing journalism before I graduated from the university. I worked in a very popular Montenegrin media outlet. The atmosphere I got used to in that newsroom, when I was starting, was that the freedom of journalists is one of the crucial things. They taught us to be free, and I tried to be free when I selected the topics, as well as in my reporting. Certainly, that freedom did not mean that I could write whatever I wanted to or what was dear to my heart, but that I could do my job in accordance with the standards and principles of journalism. Over time, that media outlet started to turn into something different from what it was in my eyes. Social networks, portals, rapid spread of information contributed to that. My colleagues and I adopted a principle never to allow our names to appear below a piece if we couldn't stand by its content. I often used that in my work if I didn't agree with something published in the newspaper. I didn't want to put

What is the public interest?

A journalist will know if the information is of the public interest by answering the question: "Whom does it concern?". When they answer that question and realize the size of the circle of people who are involved, then they will know whether the information is of public interest.

The editorial policy must be respected, the editor has the last say, but I also have the right not to sign something if I can't stand by the content



my signature. There was some disapproval, fuss, conflicts, but those were healthy arguments after which nobody would force me to stand by a piece of information that wasn't mine. The editorial policy must be respected, the editor has the last say, but I also have the right not to sign

something if I can't stand by the content.

Then the editorial policy changed, as well as the team of editors, and everything else. The pressures started increasing. Journalists' rights became limited, stories started to be selected based on what institutions or people they covered, instead of the problems in the society... They say that you have to be cautious with those institutions or people, while in reality those pieces never get published – a moment occurs when the editor says: "Let me check that, and I will let you know about the status of that story." Such a situation never happened to me, personally, but my colleagues told me that it had happened to them.

At one point, I sent some questions related to an affair that was going on, to a company that was a big advertiser in that media outlet. Nobody from that company called me after I sent those questions, but one of the key editors in the newsroom asked me how I dared to do something like that. His tone was unacceptable and humiliating to me – someone tried to reprehend me for something that is not a mistake but a rule. In the end that editor pointed out to me that the previous decision of the editorial team, even before my questions, was not to write about that company and that affair. To me, that was horrible. I sent

an email to all the editors and informed the collegium of the event. I even informed the newsroom ombudsman. That editor responded to the email, rejecting some of it and confirmed some. That's when I requested from the journalist collegium to come out, since it was my word against hers. However, I never received the response.

When they announced layoffs and reduction of the number of workers (before this situation happened), they told me that I was staying, that they were satisfied with my work. My superior and my editor-in-chief told me that. However, after the questions I sent, I was summoned and told that I was made redundant. I received the notice in February, and as of April I no longer work for that media outlet.

THE RIGHT TO HAVE A DIFFERENT OPINION: I didn't want to act against my principles. I only asked them to state their position about my case, but in that media outlet, any contradiction or different opinion were no longer wanted.

Until this controversial moment, I had no problems. I tried to do my job as professionally as I could, and nobody ever "messed with me". I realized that it was a private media outlet, and that the primary interest of the owners was profit. I worked at my own discretion – "till one point".

The editorial policy didn't change all of a sudden, but the change came slowly. Personally, I think that it is all mostly about the rapprochement between the owners and certain political structures in the country. Although everybody noticed the change, the head of the editorial team and the owners denied any change in the editorial policy. What came suddenly and unexpectedly was the change of the editorial team. This event again corresponded with the

censoring of one colleague who wrote a negative article about the same company to which I sent my questions. One of the owners removed that article from the portal, without consulting the editors, after which the editors condemned that act and stood up to the management. A new editor-in-chief was introduced shortly after.

I believe in the existence of the ethical code (Journalists Code of Ethics in Montenegro), which is, in my opinion, the Bible of journalism. If journalists obey the Code, the expansion of social media and false information cannot be an obstacle to a journalist to preserve his integrity. A journalist who obeys the code of ethics will not publish any information without verifying it first, regardless of whether they will be the first. As far as I can see, some mainstream media outlets sometimes slip up but, generally speaking, they are not in a hurry to publish a piece of information before they have verified it. Hate speech is problematic in online comments. As far as I follow the progress in that domain, nobody has yet found a way to regulate the comments on the portals, without stepping into the area of censorship.

EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL PRESSURE: The problem is to preserve your integrity without compromise. It is the hardest thing because you will get into financial troubles, and you will have little support – very few people will understand you. More of them will say that you are stubborn, than that you have integrity. That's why people want to be somewhere in the middle, they make exceptions, but also have a certain line they won't cross.


The first group of problems is related to the external factor – people with whom you collaborate outside the newsroom, your sources, institutions trying to plant

information, to pressure you, to make you publish certain pieces of information.


Other problems are related to collaboration within the media – that inside the newsroom your work isn't supported. When someone attacks you for example, verbally or physically, and you can't expect the newsroom to protect you. Media will always support you to the extent which does not adversely affect their business.

It is easier for you to fight the “external” institutions and interviewees, and much harder to fight the internal pressures coming from your employers. They are the ones paying you, your financial situation, life, basic needs, bills... depend on them, and you have to preserve your integrity and publish something you think the public should know. And that's where you get in conflict with your employer.

In my opinion, those are the main problems in journalism. If you want to preserve your integrity at any cost, you won't have the support of the society, colleagues, maybe not even your family.



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INTEGRITY VS INTEREST: It depends on the context, situation, and people's nature. You may work for your whole life without witnessing the conflict of the integrity and the owner's interests. If that situation happens anyway, people could agree to a compromise and become jobless (quit the job or be fired), salaries could be reduced, you may fall victim to mobbing, but it is also possible that you won't suffer any visible consequences. In my opinion, people who show their integrity can never stay long on executive

positions at a media outlet, or they will stay until their integrity gets in conflict with the media outlet's interests. The integrity in journalists is plentiful. However, that's not visible in the media's reporting. The reason is not the lack of ethics, but editorial policies of the media outlets and editors who edit, rewrite, shorten the newspaper articles. That is evident at certain portals – those ghost portals without the Impressum, or known owners, and methods of financing. The unethical articles most often remain unsigned. It's a lot harder to be unethical and inhuman when your signature stands under such a piece. There are a lot of journalists who do their job honestly and with integrity. I keep in touch with the colleagues working for the mainstream media, and they are struggling. Their struggle is invisible to us and the public as their pieces are frequently published the way it's published, but they struggle a lot in their newsrooms, and with their editors. Such editorial policies and media interest prevail most of the time. The situation is the same in the Public Broadcasting Network. Ordinary people with the integrity had been removed, or they are working on service information and less important stories irrelevant for the political elite. It is usually well-known who deals with "important information".

RIGHT TO INFORMATION: If we look at the media as a whole, there are some media outlets in Montenegro that are pro-regime, and there are those that oppose the regime. Immediately you have two sides, and if you read both you will get the full picture. In such situation that could be interpreted as the public interest. But I think that in Montenegro there are few people who read all the media. We are divided into those reading only one type,

who have only one point of view. They don't see the whole picture.

When you regard the media outlets individually, you will see that each has its own interest, its goal. Individually speaking, those media outlets don't work for the public interest, but in general, there is something for everyone. If you are interested in the actions of the opposition, or of those against the government, you may find the information in one type of the media. If you want to know about the affairs and criticism of the government, you can find that in another media outlet.

A citizen can find out what's happening in the society, but each individual media outlet will not provide the complete piece of information. For example, a certain media outlet may publish all its stories in a professional manner, where each story would reveal information of



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the public interest, however, that particular media outlet will not report on the topics that could jeopardize its interests. It will write about the public interest while being careful not to jeopardize its own interests. But some other media outlet will professionally write about these topics, while avoiding the topics reported in the first media outlet. In particular, if banks are major advertisers for one media outlet, that media outlet won't report of the affairs in the banking sector at all. If telecommunication companies are major advertisers for another media outlet, that one won't report of the affairs in telecommunications but will regularly report on the affairs in the banking sector,

while the first media outlet will most certainly report of suspicious operations in telecommunications. The citizens could be informed of the affairs at the banks, and of those in telecommunications, if they read both of the referred media.


I believe that all media can't have the same interests in a democratic state, but that the citizens could be well informed if they read all of the media. Mostly, I believe that the public interest lies in the media pluralism and in the pluralism of media interests.

The problem is that the citizens don't have the media literacy to recognize the media editorial policy, and to recognize that every media has its own interest. They also can't recognize what the information is, what an opinion is, or an attitude... and to compare different media outlets.

The polarization is even stronger with the change of the government, the media just switched the poles. Those who supported the government until recently are now against the new government, and vice versa. However, since yesterday's anti-regime media support only a part of the government which is packed with different opinions and actions, one can suspect a formation of a third pole – i.e. mostly a new group of the media that will support the other part of the new government, unlike the mainstream media.

> Tamara Causidis

Editor of the portal prizma.mk, the online edition of the Macedonian newsroom of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), she worked at the First program of the Macedonian radio, Radio Free Europe, television station ALSAT-M, to name a few. She is the founder of the independent union of journalists that she presided from 2010 to 2018. She was the president of the Council of Honor of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia. She is the co-author of the Journalism Ethics Manual.



■ On journalism today

When I started out, journalism was in transition between the social-political work and a profession that should work in the public interest. My first role models were people who defied the party dictatorship. The people who, at the beginning, introduced the democratic principles into the society, who questioned the government and addressed the forbidden, undesirable topics or simply issues that ordinary people faced. Those were the nineties, considered as the golden age of the Macedonian state radio, the Radio Skopje.

However, as the party oligarchs and local strongmen stopped fearing overnight for their futures and became more arrogant, their influence on the media grew. My first serious clash with the party state happened somewhere in the late 1998. I, as a news anchor, was supposed to read a commentary written by the ruling party and titled as the

Editorial commentary of the Macedonian Radio Television. It was against the Constitutional court, which had contested the results of the electoral manipulations.


I refused. What is interesting is the method they used to force me to publish this commentary. They threatened to punish and fire everyone who worked in my shift. As an editor, I allowed for the commentary to run in the news, but at the very end, just before the weather report. Since that day, I had looked for a way to leave Radio Skopje. Less than two years after, I managed to do that.

Nowadays, journalists get an email from the party headquarters with a complete text, statements and they don't even bother to print it. They just enter the studio and read

it from their mobile phone. Their work is finished for the day. And that is today's journalism – a kind of journalism that fights for rights while running away from any kind of responsibility, intelligence, honor; a kind of journalism where smart and talented young people find themselves only if they are lost or if they do not leave in time before they get infected with cynicism and hopelessness.

■ On integrity

Integrity is the only thing that sets apart professional journalists from propagandists, a name I have for



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parasites who have multiplied in our profession and who are falsely representing themselves as journalists. Integrity has always been a rare commodity, globally speaking, and today more than ever. For some it's a value and for some a burden. Trivialization dominates the public discourse. Every questioning of the value and the role of journalism is seen as pathetic, outdated and useless. Few are those who talk about integrity and even fewer are those who look for it.

■ **The most common problems in journalism today**


The most common problems in journalism derive from the fact that the profession and the industry are changing at the speed of light, above all due to the shifts in the technology and the society that cannot be followed in the context of the traditional media and the professional life.

When I started out, there were no mobile phones and today I keep asking myself how it is possible to work without mobile phones and internet.

Another problem that is getting more and more prominent and to which I have paid special attention in my union work, is the lack of immunity in journalism. I think that the biggest problem is that the title "journalist" is being used by the people who compromise their comfort, sometimes even their life and by those who have simply sold out and now do the bidding for a center of power, be it a political or a business one.

This problem has been here for a long time, but the public became aware of it when the so called fake news appeared. Fake news is only the consequence, not a cause or a problem in itself. Simply put, as a society, as a civilization, without doing anything, we have allowed anything and

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everything to pass for journalism. We have not awarded with trust, approval or praise those who have, in our name, questioned the people in power, addressed difficult issues. We have treated them the same as the others. What's more, we preferred those who

were “on our side” or who kept telling us what we wanted to hear, despite the fact that they were semiliterate, ambitious mediocrities, who could be cheaply bought with a dinner or a place close to those in power.

This cheapening, this sale of professional values, ideals if you like, is a far more dangerous threat than social networks.

■ **On public interest**

To some, it will sound funny or as if I were making this up, but I have really had a chance to talk to my so – called colleagues, directors and even chief editors, for whom the public interest is something that is interesting to the public, something they are curious about, something they would like to know more about. So, we have a situation, where health statuses are published, details even motives for suicides too, but not the information on student mass-protests under excuse that they wanted to avoid “poisoning the public with politics”. You can imagine what kind of public is produced by these media. And for some reason we are surprised by the political superstition and the ease with which the politics manipulates the voters.

The role of journalism, as the protector of the public interest, to closely follow those who are or would like to

be in power in order not to let them abuse it, is seen only on project applications of various associations. The media, along with those who regulate it, do not bother, not even for a second, with a question whether or not the public has received reliable information on important political or social issues, which is the essence of the journalism that works in the public interest.

■ **Has the situation changed when the government changed?**

In many ways yes, but where it really counts, no. What changed was that there have been no more pressures that would lead to closing down the media or to journalists losing their jobs. For now, there has been none of that, even though the media that is inclined to criticize and align with the opposition values, complain about repression, there has been no proof. There haven't been any signs, or at least no visible signs, of "buying" the editorial policy through state ads, although there is an ever-present ambition of media themselves to receive again the state aid. Changes are also visible in the fact that no small number of journalists, who had "marched" and protested against the government of Nikola Gruevski (former prime minister, Ed.), ended up being appointed spokespersons and directors or becoming "family friends" of the current prime minister Zoran Zaev. Transparency of the work of the governmental institutions is higher, although there is a visible resistance to give away the information that might endanger the image of the governing parties. These questions seldom get answered, if at all.

What hasn't changed is the perception that the media are important and not journalism which is their primary activity. That is why there are negotiations, deals and the

need to endear oneself to owners and directors of the big television stations. That is why there is a need to find ways to provide financial support through election ads, pandemic aid... whatever, it doesn't matter, what matters is to calm down the big media moguls. Journalism seen as a watch dog, equally removed from the government and the opposition, providing informed opinions, is something nobody needs, not the public, politics, economy or journalists, who enter into politics themselves (because that is where the power lies), into propaganda (because that is where the money is) and into oblivion.

> Arton Demhasaj

Executive director of an NGO which fights for democracy and dignity, and against corruption - “Cohu”, one of the best-known research centers for public policies in Kosovo.

The investigative journalism center was established within this organization.



> Your field of work is politics, but you are also in journalism. Why?

Since the founding in 2005, our main focus has been democratization, and fighting the corruption. We quickly realized that the information available to the public is insufficient for keeping it informed and doesn't provide the room to grow in other fields. So, the idea to establish a center for investigative journalism was born. There we dealt with ecological, social, and other issues. That was the initial reason we started journalism at the Cohu. During these ten years of reporting we had some excellent results, because even in the Parliament, the Parliament members discussed some of our published investigations on the financing of the political parties, but on other matters as well. At the moment, Cohu has two focuses/programs. The main program is for justice, where we supervise the courts and corruption cases, as well as other public institutions and their transparency, operating, and responsibility. The other one is the program for investigative journalism, where we deal with various issues, for example, ecological issues such as deforestation or river pollution and similar cases. Additionally, we decided to publish all

the information gathered in the field in a publicly available database. That way, that information will be accessible to all the interested media and all the institutions, NGOs, but also citizens. All the data we gather is publicly available and related to corruption, property, environment...

> Integrity is one of the basic principles of journalism ethics. Is it visible in the media reports in Kosovo, and if so, to what extent?

I can speak mainly about the internet media, because as an organization we have been following how much the internet media follow the code of ethics. I take full responsibility for the statement that all of the online media in Kosovo breaks the code of ethics they had created themselves, and that is happening almost on a daily basis. The internet media in Kosovo give no space for the other side, do not list sources of information, and take over articles from other media outlets without quoting the original authors. We cannot overlook privacy, either, because the media, often violating the code of ethics, break the data protection acts.

The main reason for breaking the code of ethics is gaining traffic on portals, more likes, and as much visibility as possible.

I believe that, if they only tried a little, all the media in Kosovo could keep up with the professional standards, but what is lacking is the will to do it. Violations happen, as I said, because of the political interest, based on being in a political party or business interest, because of connections to companies, etc. Our experience, based on many complaints we submitted to the Council, and most of which were accepted, shows that they were effective and that the media started to be a bit more careful. However,

that's not enough. The problems in media reporting and impartiality are still present.

> What is the main cause? Are the media employees aware if the Code?

The internet media outlets editors-in-chief we are talking about are on the Press Council Board. All the complaints we submit to the Council are approved by the editors-in-chief or other people the very media put there. So, it is not about the unawareness of the code of ethics. Not only editors-in-chief and editors in general, but also media employees in Kosovo are aware of the code, but it's simply easier for them to violate it. I think they do it on purpose, because it's easier to copy or quote a fictional source, that is used a lot. The media in Kosovo often quote internal sources which were never published. It is questionable who that "source known to the staff" really is. That makes no sense. For example, at the beginning of October, a media outlet published an article based on the source in the University Clinical Centre in Kosovo, claiming that the former prime minister Ramush Haradinaj had beaten his wife, without checking whether that had actually happened, but that was published in all other media outlets. After a while, both the Prosecutor and the family pub-

Do social networks change the nature of the media?

I think they do, because the public mostly uses them for reading, which is why the main focus of the media is sharing the content and publishing information on social networks. This even resulted in the media outlets having larger audience on social networks. About 90 percent of the citizens don't go directly to the website of a media outlet, but rather go to social networks and click on the articles they are interested in. That made the media turn to social networks themselves.

lished statements that the incident never happened. And what happened then? The media published a rebuttal, but that is ineffective since the majority of the population had already seen, read, or heard the previously published news. Therefore, I believe it is done intentionally, which can have political, personal or business purpose.

> What are the most common problems in doing the job professionally?

The legislative framework is good, which can be seen in practice, because in Kosovo we have plenty of televisions which have a separate market.

Do the media in Kosovo work in the public interest?

Generally, the media can be considered to work in the public interest, but I don't think that's their primary purpose. If we talk about the media outlets as business companies, their main purpose is profit, which questions working in the public interest. However, we can say that informing the public remains the priority, but behind lies the business interest to make bigger profit

At the same time there are many media outlets on the internet. So, there is a market and a possibility to work professionally, while honoring the principles of truth and impartiality. However, there is the politicization of the media, different political views, be it the television or online media, which harms their credibility, because it turns out that they function like companies. For comparison, the media outlets founded as NGOs function much better, because they don't depend on profit. Their reporting is therefore more credible,

unbiased, true, and fruitful than the media outlets that are, in fact, companies.

> Do you think, then, that is the reason for violating the ethical principles, so they make more profit?

I think that the media outlets registered as NGOs have safer financing and are therefore more stable because they receive funds mostly from foreign donations. So, first you have the money, and then you start investigating and publishing articles. This increases the level of professionalism. It doesn't exist in other media outlets, because their purpose isn't only reporting, but much bigger profit. You can easily profit from entertainment, business, even from advertising. That diminishes their professionalism and credibility in public.

> What are your biggest challenges?


The main challenge is ensuring the information, since the institutions often make the information of public importance harder to reach, which is why stories often wait to be published. For example, we have asked the ministry to provide us with the information on the report how the Ministry of Trade and Industry measures the quality of derivatives in the gas stations. We only managed to get the information now, and after we included the ombudsman. So, we finally ensured the information, but only after a process that lasted for six months. This is a primary difficulty, and the next one is financing. We always have to ask for the funds to do our work, and sometimes it can be hard to get enough donations that would be sufficient for us to keep the people we have or to increase the capacity to report as much as we can.

> You wrote about the cronyism in the relationship between politics and business. How does that affect the media scene?

The relationship between political parties and business works because of the donations that the companies give to the parties, especially during election campaigns. When a political party becomes the ruling party, they reciprocate by giving tenders worth millions. Including the media is inevitable here, because a part of the media is connected to business, and there are businessmen who even own media outlets. So, directly or indirectly, they can fall under the influence of politics.

> Ismet Hajdari

A correspondent of French news agency AFP of Kosovo. Spent the biggest part of his career reporting for foreign media outlets such as the agency Associated Press (AP), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, but also for the regional media. For six years he monitored the freedom of media in the region for the Reporters Without Borders. Visiting professor at the ISPE College in Pristina.



> Why have you decided to be a journalist? Can you recognize those reasons in today's journalism?

I became a journalist because it was, and still is, a very challenging profession. Not everyone can be a journalist, as it's the case with other professions in general. When you are young, and you think that you know everything and that you can do everything, then you choose the most challenging professions, those that require all of you, instead of just 'pieces of you', those that require irregular working hours, and allow you to discover the world around you, while allowing you to see and hear what you could never manage to grasp for a regular eight-hour-shift in an office. An idealism of sorts was dominant in the generation of journalists to which I belong. We wanted to discover the holy truth, to be the Fourth Estate in the complete sense of the word, and to fight for our readers, listeners, and viewers to have at their disposal all necessary information they need to successfully evaluate the government, power centers, political elite, and also to

be acquainted with the abuse of the referred. It was our naïve, and perhaps even childish idealism. Soon, almost at the very beginnings of our careers, that same idealism will have backfired on us, since politics rushed in, and by that time the politics had brought the successful media to ruins while placing the whole media system under its control.

Today's context in which journalism and media operate is much more favorable than it was then. However, the idealism that guided us is missing

Today's context in which journalism and media operate is much more favorable than it was then. Independent media outlets, however scarce they may be, have found their place under the sun. However, the idealism that guided us is missing. Everything, even journalism, became pragmatic and rational. Even

when you were an independent journalist or media outlet, you mostly (with some exceptions) practice journalism with a predetermined gain, and not out of love or the urge to change the world.

> You started working as a journalist soon after the famous 8th Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia, which changed the destiny of SFRY. For you as a journalist, when did the situation start to change and why?

The social context in which I started working as a journalist was not ideal from today's perspective, but it was absolutely better than the one inaugurated at the 8th Plenary Session. Communism was ruling, but before the 8th Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the League

of Communists of Serbia, Yugoslavia stood out from the rest of the communist countries with its freedom of journalism. We were as far away as heaven and earth. We were practicing journalism that was starting to take on more and more of what we call investigative writing today, while our Soviet colleagues were still copying communist reports, platforms and plans. It goes without saying that main daily press and television stations were under control of the communist party, but it was important that young and unconventional media outlets and journalist had the opportunity, if they wanted, to deal with taboo topics. Remember how Slovenia's "Mladina" annoyed the army leaders by breaking all orthodox patterns used until then to write about the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA).

And then, only one session had to "happen" in Serbia to turn everything upside down, first in Belgrade, and then everywhere. One of the first victims were the media. They started being utilized as the main means for political confrontations, fist in our own yard, and later with neighbors. The media system, inaugurated at the 8th Plenary Session, turned into a monstrous mechanism not only for retaining the power, but also for liquidation of those who did not think the same as the The Vožd (Slobodan Milosevic, editor's note). We must not forget that the first assassinations had been committed with a written word, and not until later on with a bullet to the back of the head, as it was the case with Slavko Ćuruvija (editor of "Dnevni telegraf", murdered in 1999 in Belgrade, editor's note). In this new situation, nobody in the government neither thought about the freedom of media, nor they were acquainted with that phrase. Those who couldn't adapt to the new situation and couldn't imagine themselves as tumblers and media strongholds of the new regime, they were laid


off and replaced by lackey journalists and embodiments of obedience. I witnessed that transformation. To this day I can't understand what kind of a mechanism could, just like that, change the people you went out for coffee with, shared friendship and a lot in common, turning them into specialists for poisoning of human soul. That was a turning point in my career when I became sick of the slavishly humble and, at the same time, deadly journalism. That's when I decided to leave this job, but quite accidentally, and fortunately, I started working for the international media.

> You reported from Kosovo during the '90s, for the opposition daily newspaper "Naša borba" in Belgrade, among others. How hard was it to obtain all the information at that moment?

It was hard to provide all important information due to the regime's complete boycott of the few independent media outlets. We had to devise various methods to obtain information. It was the time when armed conflicts on Kosovo started, and when it was difficult to know what was happening in the field. However, it was not impossible since that's when you start to create your own network and sources. Other colleagues were doing the same, so we regularly exchanged what we had found out, or we would jointly work to verify information coming from the areas in which conflicts were happening. What stuck in my head forever, from both human and professional aspects, from this period, were the visits to areas in which conflicts had temporarily ceased. We used every opportunity to occasionally visit the field with international observers or foreign journalists. On such occasions, I was shocked with the degree of destruction, and the indiscriminate use of force against civilians. After the Holbrooke-Mi-

losevic Agreement in October 1998 we dared to start group visits to the area. Once we travelled for 40 km without encountering a single soul. I couldn't understand that man did that. Event today I have pictures of dead civilians and burnt houses going through my head. Even today I can't understand just how a house can burn to the ground, while the chimney remains intact, peering from the charred remains. The destruction was so devastating that you started to doubt in humanity. I was among first journalists who came into the village Loxha near Pec, after terrible conflicts had ended near the village and in the village itself, at the beginning of July 1998. Both sides had withdrawn and a few elderly locals, who somehow survived, returned to the village for the first time with the aid of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). They didn't want to talk to me and my colleague from the American AP, but they discussed something, between themselves, in the ruins, pointing to various directions. "What are they discussing?", my colleague asked. "They can't agree on the location of the center of the village and the infirmary", I responded. The village was not only burnt down, but according to the claims of these locals, it was razed to the ground with bulldozers when Serbian forces got to it, to suppress any further rebellion.

All in all, for a young journalist, it was an extreme satisfaction to work for "Naša borba", that represented the culmination of professional journalism in former Yugoslavia.



Paradoxically, "Naša borba" defended the honor of the profession in the city that, after the 8th Plenary Session, became a synonym of orchestrated and dirty journalism


Paradoxically, “Naša borba” defended the honor of the profession in the city that, after the 8th Plenary Session, became a synonym of orchestrated and dirty journalism. At its peak, it was read and bought in Pristina like any Albanian newspapers, certainly not because it was pro-Albanian, but because it was trusted.

The flight over the cuckoo’s nest, unfortunately, didn’t last long since “Naša borba” was a threat to the regime that could not be tolerated for long.

> What was it like to be a correspondent from Pristina during Slobodan Milosevic’s regime? What were the biggest challenges?

Journalism, apart from politics, was the most dangerous profession, unless you were a journalist or a politician of the regime. They wouldn’t kill you at once. They probably kept that only for Serbia. They were killing you continuously. It is a situation in which a journalist’s identification doesn’t protect you, but it is a ticket to hell. I survived all sorts of things, but the hardest thing was the knowledge

that I was a permanent target, and that it was something that had to be hidden in my reporting, while I reported of deep crashes Kosovo went through from the abolishment of autonomy, such as demonstrations, violence, complete Albanian-Serbian split, and in the end war.



The hardest thing was the knowledge that I was a permanent target, and that it was something that had to be hidden in my reporting

> What kind of political or other pressures were you exposed to due to your reporting method?

I never understood how or why they never got to me, as they did to my colleagues. I don't believe it was luck. Psychological pressure for me was the most difficult type of pressure, starting with the announcement of the Ministry of Information that I will be prosecuted due to my report in "Naša borba" about the collective liquidation of Jashari family in Donji Prekaz in 1998. The announcement was presented to the media by the deputy of the Ministry of Information, and today's president of Serbia. The pressure repertoire also contained physical threats to me and my family. The worst thing that happened to me happened after I left Kosovo, before the 1999 bombing. While searching for me, police broke into my apartment in Pristina and took away my whole archive, everything I had written, recorded, or reported to that moment. I admit, it was a strike that I still remember very well.

> During the interruption of all connections, how did you manage to keep in touch with your colleagues in Belgrade and other Yugoslav republics?

If you want to keep in touch, you always find a hole in the system. When telephone lines with Croatia were cut off, I used to go to Skopje, which is only 100 km away from Pristina, to talk to the newsroom of "Danas", the paper I used to write for occasionally. Then someone discovered that it was possible to reach any phone number in Croatia via telephone exchange in Bihac, which had probably been annexed to Croatia at that moment. When telephone lines with Kosovo were cut off, while I was out during the bombing, my Serbian colleagues in Pristina (telephone lines were cut off only for Albanians) passed my messages on to the Albanian colleagues, and vice versa. There is

something in this profession that creates a deep sense of solidarity. Thanks to it, I managed to take my family alive out of Kosovo when hell broke loose there, and to get them to safety through Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia.

> You covered the war in Kosovo. How did the reporting of local and state media look like? How hard was it to avoid propaganda and warmongering?

There is no war without propaganda. It is absolutely mandatory if you want to be perceived as the side that is right. The public and media consumers recognize it right away unless they are heavily indoctrinated. The war on Kosovo is no exception to that. The propaganda used by the Serbian regime was not at all used to attract Albanians. On the contrary, everything was done to alienate them, to let them know that they are regarded as a foreign body, and that there is no place for them in Kosovo. In the end, that propaganda that started with the NATO bombing, did everything to show the world that the victims of the bombing were Albanians, and not Serbs (?), which was turning into science fiction, so the easiest way to refute this propaganda was to write and report objectively.

> What kind of consequences did the media suffer due to the nationalist politics?

It transformed the media so much that now, many of the media outlets, supposedly as a consequence, feel invited and honored to defend the country by timely recognizing dangers coming from abroad, from some other nation, religion, or language. Jokes aside, blind servility remains the main matrix according to which pro-regime media function even today. Shocked by online media, and

falling behind major changes imposed by the internet, if they want to be successful in this job, they still feel safe only under the wing of politics. They became masters of that job during the fall of the former Yugoslavia, and they were praised for that job, so now they regard it as a method of salvation from the democratization of media imposed by the mainstream media communication and online journalism.

Blind servility remains the main matrix according to which pro-regime media function even today



> Apart from being a journalist, now you also teach young people. What is their view of journalism today? How different is their view from yours at the beginning of your career?

Young people have a chance to be better than we were at their age. But they are not, still. You have to struggle for that, but at least they will not go through what we had to go through. They have excellent conditions to become successful journalists. For example, they can instantly send their work to the other side of the globe just by pressing “enter”, as opposed to us who had to struggle with typewriters, typewriter ribbons, stenography and telex. However, I don’t recognize a lot of professional enthusiasm and willingness to make sacrifices in young journalists. They want to become journalists overnight. It is not possible since this craft requires time to be learned and mastered.

> When we talk about a journalist's integrity, if you take a look at the media scene of Kosovo, how does that situation seem to you?

Professional integrity is the initial step towards independent journalism. You can't pretend to be a journalist. You either are or aren't one, i.e. either you have the integrity, or you don't. In Kosovo we don't suffer from the surplus of professional integrity. We don't have a lot of independent media outlets, either, even though all of them falsely present themselves as independent. The media can't be

in a better situation than the society they are in, and the society is still going through a democratic transition with a fresh memory of war. We are paying a high price for the fact that the majority of our political elite is comprised of war generals, who think that they have title deeds for the main governing positions, and that the state media outlets are their personal property. Our intellectual circle is

The media are not the party that you can completely rely on while attempting to decipher the reality. For that, you have to put in some effort yourself

either asleep or corrupted, according to the scheme that prevails through the whole Western Balkans. The media did not do very well in this social context. They opted for the easier way. At least the majority of them did. They don't dig very deep and are not really concerned about the fact that the majority of citizens don't have a clear image of what is actually going on in the society. The media simply fail to fulfill their main duty and mission to give the electorate the insight into the whole truth about main


processes, protagonists, and their “credits”, so that they could be awarded or punished for their performance at the following elections.

> What are the biggest challenges in journalism in Kosovo today?

A simple answer would be to get their house in order. Online journalism and social networks, as well as the disappearance of traditional media, put a huge challenge in front of the journalism, to integrate into the dominant media format in the world while retaining the main purpose which is professional reporting. In Kosovo we don't have printed media anymore because all of them, at least for now, went online. Only television manages to survive of all traditional media. The change was fast, and the media weren't prepared. Nobody cares that a large category of people doesn't have access to the internet or a computer, let alone mobile phones. Such a confusing situation has been somewhat mitigated with the emergence of a large number of privately owned television stations, so that broad public informing sort of functions. However, the media are not the party that you can completely rely on while attempting to decipher the reality. For that, you have to put in some effort yourself.

> Dafina Halili

Newsroom editor of the portal Kosovo 2.0, she started out as a journalist in the daily journal Koha Ditore. She is focused on human rights and transitional justice, dealing with issues in a post-conflict society.



> What does your work method look like?

I like talking to people, listening and investigating issues. I adore writing process and sometimes articles keep me awake at night. For me the best part is when after it is published, my interlocutors find that their problems and fights are well represented in the article; that nothing was taken out of the context and that I didn't misunderstand the information they had given me; that I didn't exploit them. It is very important to me and it is such a relief when you realize that you did this in an honest and professional way, especially when you are dealing with sensitive information. There were cases when I had wrong information, like dates and places of birth or an event. This can be corrected, but a feeling that a journalist has used someone's trauma, fight or a problem, that can't be fixed.

> What was the greatest challenge in your career?

I try to focus on civil rights, most notably women's rights, minority and LGBT rights. I work with people who had a lot of traumatic experiences, including sexual and domestic violence. It's a real challenge sometimes and I believe I learn every time I'm in the field how to ask a question

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the right way, thinking if I am additionally traumatizing my interlocutors or pressuring them too much. It's a significant challenge when you are dealing with this topic. Sometimes listening, writing and thinking about problems too can influence your daily life, it's a part of the job. The most important part is to keep on working on these stories.

Another great challenge for me is the credibility of sources. Two of my colleagues and I have been working on a story and we have been in the field this past month, talking to many people. Sometimes it is really hard to check the credibility of a source. You have to use your intuition and instinct, which are not necessarily the best option.

Another challenge, which maybe differs from the challenges of majority of journalists, at least in Kosovo, is working for alternative media. Kosovo 2.0 is an alternative media outlet and I think that what happened to my career was the best thing – to work for a media outlet, whose whole team is trying to invest into journalism that gives a voice to people, investigates, offers alternative perspectives with context and tries to explore stories in depth. They always give us time to give our best. I was fortunate to reach maturity in journalism through Kosovo 2.0. I didn't have to manufacture 10-20 pieces of news a day and be used by editors. It made me a better journalist. The problem is that since we do not report on daily basis, we have particular demographics. Even though our ratings


went up, still they cannot be compared with the ratings and number of clicks of daily reporting. That is why we are not known in every part of the country, which sometimes makes access more difficult for us.

The attack on Kosovo 2.0 in 2012, when we published a thematic magazine “Sex and Sexuality”, was a challenge. This attack of Islamic groups and football hooligans gave a reputation to Kosovo 2.0 as an LGBT organization. The publishing of this magazine launched a discussion in the society about the LGBT community that Kosovo had never had.


> What is integrity and how present is it in the Kosovo media?

It is obvious, unfortunately, that most of the media outlets and journalists in Kosovo lack integrity. It is hard to define what integrity is and why some journalists have it and others don't. As a profession, journalism has a long history in Kosovo but in a way it is also in its infancy. To understand the journalism in Kosovo, it is important to take into account its development. There was almost no journalism without censorship in the whole region. During the regime of Slobodan Milosevic in the nineties, we had a media blackout. The first schools of journalism were opened only after the war. As is the case in many another spheres, in journalism too it was hard to create and build a generation of students who really understand the meaning of ethics in journalism. We have witnessed for years this lack of tradition in journalism, where older generations influence the younger. Many media outlets are trying to create new generations of journalists from scratch, while older colleagues are doing their best to keep up with new technologies and the way the journalism

works today. There is a lack of professional journalism. This has influenced for years the work of journalists. Among the political journalists, there is also a tendency towards sensationalism. They are often the most respected ones in newsrooms, which later becomes a problem. Many political journalists limit their coverage to conferences, meetings of politicians and important, but repetitive, political issues that have been present in Kosovo for so many years, like the dialogue with Serbia. Such Facebook posts or those that focus on disputes between different political parties, distract us from the important questions that are pertinent to the everyday life of the people. Editors and chief editors continue to support and



Even in the worst work surroundings, there still are good journalists, who are trying to do their job in the best possible way, but the bad environment is preventing them from doing so



give more importance to the political journalists, so others feel rejected and as if what they have to give is not important.

Even in the worst work surroundings, there still are good journalists, who are trying to do their job in the best possible way, but the bad environment is preventing them from doing so.

> Why is it so?

I think that they don't have a clue what good journalism is. If you are the chief editor, it's important for you to have the coverage of political issues. This is important everywhere, not just in Kosovo, because we are talking about the people in power and questioning their work and

responsibility is something journalism stands for. There is much talk of nepotism and we think of investigative journalism only when it covers corruption and organized crime, without showing how this corruption influences the wellbeing of Kosovar citizens or how the lack of respect of law violates their civil rights. There's a widespread idea, which is true up to a certain point, that political articles are great clickbait. This is not nec-



There's a widespread idea, which is true up to a certain point, that political articles



essarily true only for political topics. If you take a look at an average newspaper or an internet platform, apart from reporting on daily basis, you will find Facebook posts on what has one politician said about another, which turns an article into a tabloid gossip piece. Many citizens support one of the political parties and that bait incites them to open that article and interact with one another. I think that with this approach, newsrooms are detaching themselves from real stories because the real stories are factual.

> What are the most common problems in professional journalism?

The lack of good stories and a truly dedicated team. A report can be good, but it's the context that turns it into a good story, which takes time. Even the most ambitious journalists that enter this profession with love sometimes forget this very quickly. We talk about the exploitation of workers, but very often it's the very media outlets that exploit their employees. Most journalists in Kosovo have very low salaries that they can barely live off until the end of the month. That is why the experienced journalists work from two to four years in reputable newsrooms and


then leave to become communication officers for ministries. In media outlets, there is a great disparity between the salaries of journalists and those of editors and chief editors. Working on stories I mentioned takes a lot of time and dedication which becomes exhausting when one does not have the basic workers' rights.

> Is it possible to preserve integrity in journalism in the times of mass propaganda and how?

I think that there is no good answer to the question of how to survive mass propaganda, fake news, clickbait and sponsorships. In journalism, there are often no good answers or real definitions. When I think about this question, I remember the best conclusion I heard somewhere. It's a cliché.



In journalism, there are often no good answers or real definitions



Journalists, who really believe in what they do and the responsibility they have towards the society, need to continue to work and fight the bad journalism with the good journalism. Regardless of how obvious it may be, the good journalism is based on caring for human-interest stories.

> What does “public interest” mean for you and do the media work in the public interest?

I haven't found a good definition of the public interest in any of the articles, journalism textbooks or in discussions with journalists from all over the world. When we publish a story we need to ask if it is interesting for the public or if it is in its interest. The public interest can be a simple human curiosity, something people want to read about, something entertaining, which is not necessarily in their interest. Researches often mention as an important

component when discussing public interest, private lives of people in power and the manner of reporting about them. This type of news is not a problem only here, but everywhere. It is not in the public interest, but it serves as clickbait, bringing money to the industry and media outlets. The problem is that people in power use social media to promote their private lives, which gets reported about. The question is how not to spend too much time on it. This has become of vital importance, since not many media outlets have enough space for journalists. If the journalistic work is limited to copying Instagram, Twitter or Facebook content, you are wasting the time that could have been used to investigate or look for a good story that may be in the public interest. So, there's a serious fight against all the fake portals and social media everywhere and not just here in Kosovo. It seems to me that now is the best time to talk about the meaning of the public interest in the newsrooms and redefine it and to choose more carefully what needs to be published and what doesn't.

> How do you see present-day journalism?

I think that journalism today is more exciting than ever and can be seen everywhere. All the good magazines and journals, like The New York Times, The New Yorker, The Guardian and Vox have so many novelties so many new options, from documentaries to podcasts. Since you are on the web, you have so many possibilities to do the job, so many ways to work on a story and use all the options. Until a few years ago, the only thing you had was your pencil or a laptop, and now the way we process and get the news is more dynamic, because everything is on the internet. I'm not saying that the core of the journalism

has changed, because it hasn't. Not every written article has to be turned into podcast, but there is so much to be done to approach stories and the journalism in a more creative way.

> Anila Hoxha

The Rule of Law and organized crime journalist on „Top Kanal“ television. Anila Hoxha is one of the top female journalists in Albania and a multiple awards winner.

> You have been reporting about violence against women for many years. Partly thanks to your reports, Law on domestic violence was created in Albania. How hard is it to be covering that issue?

Every story about abused women, regardless of whether they were the victims or the abusers, is a separate story. They all moved me deeply and I follow them through. Some of those women are no longer alive, but I follow their children's stories. Here is an example of judge Fildez Hafizi. I learned about her case only after her abusive husband had killed her. The institutions had offered her protection, which she refused even though she was aware of the consequences. She forgave her husband and lost her life. What moved me the most, and what I keep following every step of the way is the story of her children, her son and her daughter. They refuse to see their father. The court had found him guilty and his children don't want to see him. As they say themselves, it is their way of punishing him for his crime.

Unfortunately, the society reacted with lots of prejudice, too, asking "Why did she leave her husband if he had paid for her education?" and questions along that line. I am so sorry because of that. I am sorry that a part of the society still thinks that a wife is her husband's property.

Here is another example. It was one of the first stories after the new Law on domestic violence entered into force. Until then, women were uninformed about their rights and how to fight their abusers. First of all, they were the victims of the oppressive opinions inside their families. They used to live for their families, tribes, and worried what others would say about them.

For me, that woman was a pioneer in the history of those who gathered up the courage, left the abuser, and publicly spoke about the abuse they had endured for years. She was a mother to three boys and a victim of daily violence by her husband. One day she came into the editorial. At the time I was working on many stories about violence against women with the mottos “report the violence”, “don’t be quiet”, etc. A doctor, whom I didn’t know, was watching my reports and he recommended to her to look for me. She came with a broken arm, her whole back was covered in bruises, her nose was broken. She was wearing a cast. Her husband treated her like a worthless thing, a property he could use as he pleased. She would never complain. One day she left her home without his approval and he “punished” her. So, she reached out to me and agreed to tell her story, and at the same time asked me to help her get into the Shelter. After we published the story, many reactions followed. At the police station where she had reported her husband, seven police officers were arrested, because instead of accepting her report, they told her it’s disgraceful to report your husband to the police. They didn’t file the report and they didn’t send her to the hospital to get medical attention. This event helped the police to start taking seriously all the women victims of violence and their accusations and reports.

The hero of this story opposed the mentality of the whole society and challenged it.

> How did you feel after that case?

I often report sexual and domestic violence because it happens silently, while underneath it all is chaos. Individuals, victims of those crimes must definitely know that they are not alone, but they must know just the same that there is a mechanism: call the police, report the violence, and first of all do not back out after reporting it. I feel good when the violence ends, when a case ends in the victim's favor, because many women already know what number to call when they get beaten up, abused, raped and how to ask for help from the police. However, it is awful when I find out that when domestic violence ends in murder, the calls to the police increase significantly. So, there are still many women who are afraid to report violence, and whenever they hear about such murders, they realize what danger they are in.

> How difficult is it to keep a professional distance in stories like these? Have you stepped out of the boundaries the profession imposes?

I have. I had a case of a girl who was sexually abused by her father. When the case ended up in court, the rest of the family turned their backs on the girl, asking her to drop the charges because of the shame they were all subjected to. She was "raped" again in court. In the court, I saw her completely destroyed. Until then, I was following the trial, taking statements. Until then, I was a journalist. At that moment, my job as a journalist ended. I found out where she worked, and I looked for her there. I offered her to send her to a shelter, but she refused at first. I knew she would go home and that she would be harassed by her

mother, brothers, and sisters as well. That's why I insisted until she said yes and went to the shelter. She completed courses that improved her life. I can't say we became friends, but I did everything to help her become a part of the society again. Whenever I can, I ask her how she is.

> What is the hardest thing in these stories?

The hardest part is when women who had reported their husbands or relatives for violence, after they get arrested or punished, come to the court and say they have forgiven them. It is very difficult to get out of the cycle of abuse. It is also hard to write about it. Especially when you are aware of what will follow. Forgiveness is a part of being human, but, from my experience, I know that the cases when the abusers stop to think or repent are very rare. Sometimes I feel powerless and I can't find the answer to what else I can do. I can only tell them to take care of themselves.

> What are the working conditions for the journalists in Albania?

Being a journalist in Albania is difficult nowadays. It's difficult not just because of the propaganda on the social media, but also because of the circumstances surrounding the work of journalists. It is difficult as long as they feel unsafe in performing daily tasks, as long as their job is jeopardized, and as long as the Labor Code isn't followed for many of them.

Lately, we have a big problem with fake news. Fake news directly affects journalists' integrity. On the other hand, if we're going to talk about quality journalism, I am noticing very short deadlines given to the journalists. A journalist is a field worker rushing to get some information and


publish the news, while time is not playing in their favor. On the other hand, the journalist is in danger, both privately and professionally.

> What challenges do you face on daily basis, considering the topics you are covering?

Being short on time. Looking closely, it is in my interest as a journalist to have much more time for reporting and not to fall into the trap of short, daily informing. To always search for additional information. Unfortunately, that doesn't happen often, especially in television journalism. I wish I had the time and the space to investigate certain topics thoroughly enough, in order to provide the public with all the necessary information, give them context, and point out the consequences.

Daily journalism brings challenges that are sometimes predictable (typical difficulties), and sometimes unpredictable. My biggest professional challenge was moving from newspapers to television. I started my career in the newspapers, which is a completely different type of journalism, we write the news differently, we develop stories, work on topics, we have room to describe in detail the elements of the story in order to make it clear to the readers.

Television was a complete opposite - everything I said had to be visualized, the sentences were short, and there is a whole set of other elements which are entirely different than the newspapers, firstly the race with the time, because you must be fast and at the scene.



There are several ways to threaten a journalist in Albania. It's not only about death threats or threatening the job safety. Corruption also has many forms

On the other hand, you are exposed to threats, even though you didn't put the cases on public display. There are several ways to threaten a journalist in Albania. It's not only about death threats or threatening the job safety. Corruption also has many forms.

Despite everything, I never even thought about leaving journalism. I still don't know what could make me leave it, but I am positive that it won't be an outside influence.

> **Where is the limit of a journalist's integrity?**

A professional journalist knows very well what responsibility they have towards the public, what their duty and mission are. When I say professional, I am referring to the experienced journalists who know that their mission is to inform the public, to provide accurate, true, and con-



Being unbiased is extremely important



— confirmed information, and to be unbiased. Being unbiased is extremely important. I am reporting about the rule of law, and, since I often follow court hearings on a daily

basis, I see the difference. When it comes to reporting from the court hearings where suspects and the accused are brought to justice, there is a very clear line in reporting. It separates certain journalists whose personal beliefs about the person who was arrested or convicted in a certain case are visible, and the journalists who honor the presumed innocence, i.e. act professionally. I mentioned this example to show that the line isn't always as delicate as it may seem. It is often said that the line between professional and unprofessional reporting is difficult to spot. But not to me. The lines are clear to me since the moment I pick up my notepad, microphone, or recorder and start

digging about a topic. For me, that's the only way to do this job.

> Do you see any differences when you compare journalism today to the time you were starting?

Journalism today is radically different. Like two pages of the same book. Firstly, 20 years ago, due to the lack of technology, a journalist had to be present in the field. Unfortunately, along with all the advantages the technology brought, it somewhat removed the journalists from the field. That resulted in the newsrooms publishing their own sophisticated propaganda, and publishing everything and anything turned journalists into spokespeople. Television journalists, too, fell into the trap of publishing as quickly as possible, chasing exclusives, which prevents them to see the bigger picture and look for the extra information. Earlier, maybe because we didn't have technology, we used to follow the principle "go, see for yourself". In order to reach the news, we had to leave the newsroom. Today, the news reaches the newsroom.

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> You have a long career in Albanian journalism, and you went through many professional challenges. Do you have some advice for a young journalist?

Stay impartial! Do not let other use you! Serve the public! To me, these three pieces of advice are very important. I have always reported about common people, about personal stories that turned out to be the face of the whole

We must report about the people whose voices remain unheard



society, for example, about victims of violence against women, while other media outlets were publishing so-called big stories that turned out to be non-existent, that they were inflated. We must report about the people whose voices remain unheard. Maybe to the others these stories seem small and peripheral compared to the organized crime, drug trafficking, corrupted officials, but we must tell those stories just as much. We must report about the problems of common people.

> Did some of those stories get a happy ending after they were published?


Many years ago, dozens of women were arrested on the charges of growing cannabis. I had some hints that those women were found guilty in order to protect others and that they were innocent. They took the fall to save their partners: husbands, fathers, brothers, sons. Among them was an elderly woman who posed no threat. She lived with her grandson and raised him all by herself. A question imposed itself: How could a 68-year-old plant cannabis in her garden? I asked the question publicly and started investigating. After those reports, she was released before the sentencing.

The other story is about a woman who killed her husband in self-defense after years of abuse. She was arrested, and her underage children stayed alone at home, isolated in the village. A few months after this murder I went back to the house and found the children in very poor conditions. They had nothing to eat. One of them, a nine-year-old girl, was trying to make bread by herself. That video

caused a lot of reactions, and the children received support until they turn 18. Even today, after all these years, that little girl who was trying to make bread with her tiny hands, sends me a message, saying “thank you”.

> Meri Jordanovska

Member of the Committee for Complaints of the Council of Media Ethics and Supervisory Board of the Association of Journalists of North Macedonia; recipient of several awards; she worked for BIRN and today she works as a journalist for the agency Makfax and she is an assistant of the chief editor of the portal A1; author of the first database of media ownership, foreign investments and the architectural project “Skopje 2014” in North Macedonia.



> What is the media scene in North Macedonia like today?

We are used to the fact that rules of the profession are not respected, that professional integrity is rare and we accept that as normal. That is why the professional standards got lowered and I believe that is the biggest problem. When the standards start dropping in a few newsrooms, there's a chain reaction and it spreads to almost all media outlets.

I think that the journalists in North Macedonia have already accepted the fact that journalism in general depends upon political parties and financial elite; that they already know what can and what cannot be published in the media and that they wonder what kind of consequences they may suffer if someone even as much as suggests that they rewrite a certain article. The main rea-

The main reason for the relationship some journalists, editors and media owners have with business elites and political parties lies in the fact that the latter have the money the media needs, which makes the media dependent



son for the relationship some journalists, editors and media owners have with business elites and political parties lies in the fact that the latter have the money the media needs, which makes the media dependent.

As a journalist that has worked in the media business for a long time, I see that this is accepted as a normal occurrence, so that they stopped even trying to

focus on important topics. That is why I don't believe that there is integrity, apart from several TV outlets and online media that give their best to inform the public without bias.

> To what extent do social networks influence the work of the media?

Social networks have become the biggest and the most influential media, which is in fact a double-edged sword. Looking at it objectively, it is a big problem that the traditional media are competing with social networks. On the other hand, everything that is published on Facebook or Twitter becomes an undisputed truth for certain people. It is hard to work on the stories that became ultimate truths on networks, because it is hard to explain to people that they may be wrong. Even the media begin to accept everything that is published on social networks and often it's the fake news that gets published there.

During the pandemic caused by the corona virus, which we are going through at the moment of this interview, we have had a few obvious incidents with fake news.

For instance, there was a photo of the WHO members showing that there was no physical distancing between them during a meeting. A great number of media outlets has used it to show how the WHO members do not respect the protocols they themselves have adopted. It took a short internet search to realize that it was an old photograph from the time before the pandemic, but people have taken it for a fact.

We had a similar situation in September 2020, when there was a promotion of the ruling coalition between the party of the Albanian minority in Macedonia (DUI) and the Social Democratic Union (SDSM). On a false Twitter profile, it was published that the former Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras congratulated the Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev on the formation of the new government. Dozens of sites have published this information.

Social networks can sometimes point to a certain topic that needs to be worked on, but, unfortunately, everything that gets published in North Macedonia is immediately understood as an undisputed truth and it is published for clicks and likes. This is a big problem.

Mistakes happen, but we, as journalists, have to be aware that everything needs to be checked before it gets published. It is rarely done and that is why readers and viewers are slowly losing their trust.

> What media, more precisely, are you referring to?

First of all, to online media. I am a member of the Committee of Media Ethics. The greatest number of complaints we get refer to internet portals.

For instance, the news on Tsipras was published on sites whose owners are known and that was probably a mistake that had happened in a hurry. The biggest problem when it comes to professionalism occurs due to the fact that portals do not have ownership transparency. And so it happens that there is one person behind them, someone who literarily creates news for specific business and political interests, as well as financial gain. Sometimes they just copy and use content of the messages that have been sent to them. For instance, someone sends a text that a certain person is guilty of corruption, because they stole something and I only copy and publish it without editing. This is how it works. The worst thing is that such portals are very popular and big companies pay for their ad space, which makes this absurd even more terrifying.

> What are the most common problems professional journalists face?

The fact that portal ownership is not regulated. I work for two news portals and follow daily these kinds of sites, so I can see what is being published there. It's below any standard. I feel shame when I see what they do there. In North Macedonia, anyone can make a site without clear ownership, without legal notice, without headquarter details, photographer, editor, lector... People behind these portals get large sums of money from big companies, according to my knowledge, even companies and their executive directors fear bad publicity. These are the classic extortion cases: "If you don't give me the money, I will publish what I have on you". And soon enough audio and video recordings start showing up. In fact, it's blackmail. People's lives get destroyed because of it. This has really destroyed the journalism standards in North Macedonia.

When a complaint arrives to the Committee of Media Ethics, there's not a single article of the codex that hasn't been violated, from the 1st to the 18th. Those are the kind of news articles that anyone could write and publish. I will say it again. We can count on the fingers of one hand the number of journalists who try to keep the journalism standards high. Endless commotion and popping out of hundreds of portals, as is the case with the above mentioned, has led us to this point where we publish news as fast as possible and that is why the number of analysis and investigative pieces, offering a more complete picture of certain situations, is small.

We have only short pieces and sequences from events, which is the reason for a decline in the quality of articles. The situation got worse during a decade long rule of the VMRO DPMNE, and now we have officially hit rock bottom. We went so deep that it's very hard to get back up.

> During your career, you were exposed to threats and pressures. How did you fight them and what were the consequences you had to face?

Yes, in my career I put up with enormous pressures, especially during the period we have just gone through – we were witnesses of one regime for ten years. There were lawsuits filed against us, a large number of politicians and their colleagues sued journalists. There were big and subtle pressures. There was never a situation when someone would call you and say “If you publish this, I will kill you!”, but rather “If you publish this, we will publish something against you”. It usually went in that direction.

I will give you an example. While we were at the independent television station A1, my colleague Misko Ivanov and I worked on a series of stories about a businessman

and a politician Ljubisav Ivanov-Dzingo and the town of Kratov, he literally ruled over. These stories were reports on life in Kratov. Nobody contacted us directly or tried to pressure us if we broadcast it, but certain reports against me started appearing on one TV station owned by Ljubisav Ivanov-Dzingo. They tried in another way to discredit me as a woman or a journalist, with the same goal. There was a series of reports on TV station Sitel, where they claimed that SDSM, then ruling party, had bought me an apartment. They ran these reports for two months.

I tried to deny it, explain that I had taken a loan from a bank, that nobody had bought that apartment for me. I even sent documents to prove that I had taken a loan, but they nevertheless continued to claim that certain politicians had bought this apartment for me and that that was why I published stories against their boss.

I met with similar pressure when I worked on a story about media ownership in our country. We published a list of phantom websites that had no legal notice or a contact address with many companies still using these sites for advertising. One of the owners called my boss and told him that they would like to be taken off that list. They transferred the message to me and I told them that there was no way. We didn't know who was behind that site, who wrote the articles, especially the articles full of insults, staining the reputation of the third parties. The website in question is dokaz.mk. We published the list. The very next morning, they started publishing pieces used to degrade women in the most banal ways, for instance, asking how often women change their underwear. They underlined that women rarely changed their underwear and they used my photograph on the cover page. Later on, they published even more articles. The title

of one of them read “Why do men have mistresses?” The text was taken from a foreign site, but my photograph was again on the cover page. That is how they tried to pressure me, because I didn’t want to remove that site from the list of unprofessional portals. I decided to ignore this, even when people wrote to me:” Do you see what he’s doing? What he’s publishing? He’s been using your photographs everywhere”. I really decided to ignore everything, because I truly believe that the best thing is not to pay any attention to them. We need to fight them using other mechanisms. They should not be sued, that would only give them more publicity. We need to educate citizens about the professional standards so that they would know which media outlets are trustworthy and which are not. Media literacy is the key.



We need to educate citizens about the professional standards so that they would know which media outlets are trustworthy and which are not



> Borjan Jovanovski

Editor-in-Chief of the online platform NovaTv.mk and a correspondent of Euronews from North Macedonia. Host of the show Clic plus on Tv 21 and a Euronews correspondent.

Worked for A1 TV as an editor, a correspondent from Brussels, and the author of the show Evrozum. Collaborated with N1, Al Jazeera, BBC, VOA. Winner of the award “Krstev Petkov Misirkov” for accomplishments in TV journalism, as well of the national award for investigative journalism.



> To what extent is professional integrity in journalism visible in the media in North Macedonia?

This is not a question only for journalism. I think that we have a general problem in all professions when it comes to integrity. I think that we, the journalists, as people for whom working for the public good is imperative, should step out of the shell of journalism, and try to influence working on the integrity in general. We can only do that through the educational system, which is still conservative and has remained intact by reforms. We miss integrity in all crafts, and the issue of integrity is important for setting in motion various other processes, not only in North Macedonia, but in all our societies.

This is the main cause of the situation we are in now. I understand the poor socioeconomic situation we live in, which is often the reason and justification for colleagues

to cross to the other side of the red line. It appears to me that this is being done casually, and that is often taken as an excuse for abandoning the professional norms. For me, integrity is an imperative. You either have it, or you leave this profession. But the issue of culture and education is more important than socioeconomic factors. It seems to me that the culturological process is just what we miss to

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Hardly any of the media outlet owners understand what a journalist's integrity is. They invest in media to accomplish other political interests, and not to have a medium that would have a positive influence on the society
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be able to understand what integrity represents, but it requires space and time.

Take for example us, journalists. Hardly any of the media outlet owners understand what a journalist's integrity is. They invest in media to accomplish other political interests, and not to have a medium that would have a positive influence on the society. It is a process that is yet to happen inside the heads of all of us, and which should first enter the educa-

tion. It goes without saying that we as journalists have to work on that as much as we can.

> You were often exposed to assaults and pressures which went so far that you a funeral wreath was delivered to your home address, while your wife and children were there, or you were spat on in public. Have such situations swayed you?

I think that they did sway me, and also led me to become disgusted by some things. Sometimes I say to my colleagues that I think that, if we lived in an organized coun-

try like Sweden or The Netherlands, we would receive a disability retirement after what we have been through, which is unimaginable around here. Yes, it swayed me, but at the same time, it stirred up the defiance in me. My response and my attitude towards all that are very ambivalent, and it is a dilemma I live with. Now, better conditions have been created, we are far from having a real media landscape in which you can reach your maximum after 30 years of experience. That's hard to find. I am in a dilemma. With every our performance and piece, we are exposed to all kinds of offenses, since bots and haters never stop working, while public prosecutors and justice system are still far from reacting properly, just as the society is far from creating the instruments to prevent that. I don't know what to say.

> To what extent did the social networks contribute to all that?

They contributed a lot. When the political authoritarian structure of Nikola Gruevski recognized me as someone who influences the public in a way that did not suit them, an orchestrated campaign started against me. First via social networks, then pro-regime media outlets which were the government's megaphones took over those disqualifications and spread them further with one goal – to represent me as a problem. Social networks were used to discredit me in every sense. If today I wrote that the day was beautiful, within half an hour you would read “You, Soros-loving bot,” and similar things, which has nothing to do with my experience of a beautiful day.

> Why are you still in journalism?

After thirty years, I am afraid that I don't know what else to do. It is hard for me to leave journalism. It is a passion.

That's why we stayed for so long despite all the inconveniences we've experienced. On the other hand, journalism carries psychical fatigue that's hard to explain.

> Did the position of journalists change from the times you started doing this job until today?

There is a huge difference in a negative sense. When I was starting my career in 1991 at Radio Skopje, to us, young journalists, all doors were wide open, and we had a lot of freedom since they needed new blood. It was the enthusiasm brought in by democracy, after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Soon, a crew of journalists and myself started preparing Dnevnik (translator's note: Daily news) at 10 pm on Radio Skopje, that became very influential after a short time. Then the first independent television station A1 was established, and the whole crew went there. We worked 27/7 with great enthusiasm, new standards were adopted, all sorts of things were happening. A1 as a television station, Dnevnik as a newspaper, those were the media outlets that visibly influenced the changes in the society. Today hardly anything makes sense – who publishes what, nobody trusts no one, everything is discredited. Everything that had any influence has been placed into a grinding machine, which ground it to kill that influence. Just look at how they closed the A1 television. It had been closed by special forces, after which brutal propaganda was initiated to silence us all, despite the fact that the media outlet was gone. I was shocked.

That situation really shook me, but I thought that they would leave us alone. However, that didn't happen. I came to realize, after a month or two, that they will come to our houses, shut our refrigerators, prevent us from securing the very basic existence.

When that failed, a huge discreditation propaganda started.

Today you have chaos. A regular citizen is exposed to influencers, tabloids, social networks. Imagine that person – whom and what should he believe? In that sense everything is completely degraded.

Let me return to my personal views and ambivalence. I can't grant amnesty to myself, or to my generation. We are truly defeated. We started some 30 years ago and look where we are now. One should live with this and find a ground zero from which we could start building a quality situation, through which the media and journalists could regain their place in the society.

> When you say that you have been defeated, how did the overall experience affect young generations of journalists?

There are only a few examples, but I know a couple of them and that gives me hope that the flame is still burning. Now you could ask me why only a few. Because I assume that the integrity and the enthusiasm those kids have in a very contaminated environment come from their homes, from their upbringing, an incident that occurred in their microcosm. A system that creates people with integrity and enthusiasm doesn't exist. The time in we live in kills that energy, it is in a permanent antagonism with that energy. That is why it may be harder for these kids now. In 1991 in Macedonia we all experienced a great change. A new hope had just arrived, democracy after the fall of the Berlin Wall. That energy caught us and gave us certain strength.

The kids that I talk about deserve a medal, since they don't have such support, and they are living in a toxic

society. In 1991 we had senior colleagues that handed us Dnevnik at 10 pm. A1 completely trusted with leading the newsroom with only two-three years of experience. They sent us abroad to learn. I was at a Belgian television station and learned the job. There's no such thing nowadays. If today I were myself from 1993, 1994, there would be no one to enable me to realize that energy. So, hats off to these kids. They are a spark of hope that gives us the optimism that the fire of enthusiasm can be rekindled.

> You managed to create an independent media outlet Nova TV with your colleagues. Former government attempted to discredit you by creating a media outlet with almost identical name. How possible was it for you to do your job during that period?

For ten years I lived in uncertainty whether we would get a project or not, or how long it would last. If you are working on an issue, the institutions are closed for you since you are unwanted there. You can't even go through the door, let alone get something from them. They were forbidden to give statements to me. Let's say I need to do a report for Euronews, and they are right to expect statements from the institutions that are closed for me. The biggest frustration for me is that my most mature and productive years, between 40 and 50, went by in a struggle to survive, both physically and professionally.

> When in 2001 you decided to work for the office of the current Macedonian president Boris Trajkovski, you sided with one political party. How did you manage to settle that with your professional integrity?

I didn't have any problems with that. When the Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed, which ended a six-

month armed conflict between the National Liberation Army and the security forces of North Macedonia, a great trauma for our society remained. I sided with those who believed that Macedonians failed to understand the needs of the ethnic Albanian group. A large portion of them were influenced by the nationalist leader from Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic. In December, I received a call from president Trajkovski, who was alone in that agreement. Even the party that nominated him VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) had left him. He invited me to work on the promoting the spirit of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. I consciously gave up much higher fees to work on that, as I believed that it was the only way out.

I was given the opportunity to create the institution of a president as transparent as it can be. That was the first time that we had press conferences every week where everyone could ask whatever they wanted. I have no regrets since that position never compromised my work of a journalist even for a second. When I accepted that position, I declared a moratorium on my work.

Even today I don't understand what an independent journalist is. We are dependent on certain circumstances. To this day, the integrations of North Macedonia to the European Union, the joint life of Macedonians and Albanians, peace and democracy, are something for which I believe that as a journalist I should work for.

> Eldin Karic

Executive director of NGO “Center for Developing media and analysis” (CRMA), and also editor in an online magazine Zurnal (Journal), CRMA’s main project.

Previously editor-in-chief, deputy editor-in-chief and executive editor of the Start BiH, a multiple award-winning magazine, including the annual Amnesty International media award.



> What kinds of pressure does the Zurnal newsroom go through because of the stories you publish?

Working in Zurnal means being under constant pressure. It is hard to determine which one is harder. The regime has several ways of making us give up on investigating and publishing the information about their criminal actions. The biggest pressure are definitely the constant defamation lawsuits. People in the system have the means and the lawyers at their disposal for the lawsuits. They control the judicial system, so the processes last for years, and that’s both physically and financially exhausting. On the other hand, they control the cash flow, so in the eleven years that we have existed for, we’ve never received a single convertible mark from a local fund, nor from advertising, because they control the advertising market, as well. The media outlets they control tend to deny the information we publish, and they often label us as foreign mercenaries or the media outlet that works for a side that is in that case opposite of their contractor. Again, that

creates an opinion in the public that we work for this or that side, so we went through the whole list, we were foreign mercenaries, Chetniks, Ustashes, balijas... Of course, there are also death threats. For now, luckily, we haven't had any serious attacks on our journalists. However, I think that every threat should be taken seriously and treated that way.

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If you wrote about corrupted doctors or hospital directors, and tomorrow you, or a member of your family needs to go to them for their medical attention, you have to ask yourself whether you will have problems, and whether you are going to receive proper care because you had done your job properly

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It often happens that our families and friends have problems because of what we do. If you wrote about corrupted doctors or hospital directors, and tomorrow you, or a member of your family needs to go to them for their medical attention, you have to ask yourself whether you will have problems, and whether you are going to receive proper care because you had done your job properly.


I don't even need to talk about the pressure each of us puts on ourselves by checking whether all the necessary evidence is there and whether the story is well-rounded.

> Speaking of that kind of pressure, do journalists have professional dilemmas?


Most certainly. You often wonder whether it's all worth it. Especially if you know that very few or none of it will

be processed, that those who threaten you won't be held accountable. That those responsible for the corruption and criminal won't be held accountable. Money is no motivation for this job because there are so many other better paid jobs with much less pressure. Somewhere where you are protected, where the hours are regular, where you won't be despised because of your job.

There are so many more reasons to be frustrated by this job, and that's why very few people are ready to do it.



There are so many more reasons to be frustrated by this job, and that's why very few people are ready to do it



> How difficult is it to maintain your integrity in such conditions?

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, unfortunately, journalists don't stick to their integrity too much. Here, they basically follow the lead of the politicians, they depend on them and in a way support what the politicians want to present to us. There are always exceptions, a small number of people do value their integrity and are ready to follow through.

The main reason for that situations is pure existence. People in journalism need to live off their salaries, and in a situation where you have an unsettled and politics-controlled media market, those two things are almost undefeatable. When you have nowhere to pay your journalists from or when the journalists can't make a living from what they're paid, then of course they can't do quality work. Unfortunately, politicians control 99.9 percent of the media market in BiH, and so has the control over the content and the information. The journalists who have

managed to find a way of financing themselves outside of politics in BiH, succeed in maintaining their integrity and function that way. The essence is in the media market, in financing the media market, which is controlled by politics, and as such prevents the professionalism to work.

> Apart from the problems we've mentioned, what else makes the journalists' job harder in BiH?

The society we are working in. In BiH the situation is such that investigative journalists are targets of the politicians, then the judiciary system and the audience they speak to. What's created is an atmosphere where the one bringing the truth is neither appropriate nor wanted.

With the judiciary system, the problem is that they don't respond. On the other hand, we have 40 lawsuits against us filed by the people from our stories. We have never lost a lawsuit, but we spend a significant amount of our time in court, in all sorts of court disputes, defending the truth we had published from the people who should be behind bars.

The problem is also the society that has very little or no reaction to what you publish. They don't ask who's responsible, they believe the politicians more than they believe their own eyes.

> When you say that the ones bringing the truth are unwanted, how much did the social networks contribute to that?

It's hard to believe anyone these days. That's the main motive of those manufacturing false information - to create an atmosphere where no one trusts no one and nothing is true. When nothing is true, you don't know what is true and your true piece of information isn't as effective as it would have been if the atmosphere was

different. A journalist should do their job properly in that kind of situation. On the other hand, fake news is a big problem of the society and I hope that it will be solved with increasing the media literacy.

> As an editor, what is the most important for you in your relationship with a journalist?

Trust is the most important. If that is broken, on either side, it is difficult to do your job professionally and responsibly. A journalist always has the freedom to publish the information that they can prove. Of course, it's up to the editor to assess whether that content justifies the public interest and whether it was prepared in "good faith". Communication between the editor and the journalist should exist in order to eventually gather additional information. A journalist sometimes "enters" the story too much, and can't assess how well his story is documented, whether their source is trying to use them, or they took a side in a case. That's when the role of the editor comes in, who should balance all that, so we get a professional content that the public believes.

> Is your position as the editor different than the positions of the editors you used to work with as a journalist?

Every editor has certain qualities, something they are recognized by. What is, maybe, a distinction for me as an editor, compared to the editors I've worked with, is that I have never said to my journalist not to write about this or that. I've never reacted to the threats or accusations. I've never ordered a journalist to write about someone. I believe that the role of the editor is to be between the journalist and the audience, to guarantee the journalist

their integrity, and to provide the public with accurate and timely information.

> We are talking at the time of the world pandemic. Did a global crisis of this size help bring back trusting the media? In the beginning, ratings were rising for many, there were surveys showing a rise in the ratings of the traditional broadcast and print media. Why is that?

When you are isolated and locked down, you have no other choice than to follow the media in order to learn what is happening in the world. Naturally, people are more sensitive and more curious in times like this. Especially in this case, when we didn't know almost anything about the Coronavirus, pandemic, microbiology... Add a broken system on top of that, and we get an ambiance of pathological hunger for information. Due to an enormous amount of information and the media's need to hold the audience's attention, a flood of half-truths and fake information. I think that this period will be remembered as the time when fake information entered our lives. Conspiracy theories, lies and half-truths became common. When you have a flood of fake information, then you lose the concept of what is lie and what is truth. The society becomes polarized based on lies. You need to put in the extra effort to protect your accurate and checked information from the fake news and misuse. I think people have reached a new level of addiction to information, but that they trust the media even less than they did before the pandemic.

> Where do you see the journalism today?

This profession became more important than ever. Today almost every human being is connected to a source of information. Besides air, water and food, people became

dependent on information. Regardless of the audience structure and age, everybody seeks their own part of the information space. A huge hunger for information

Besides air, water and food, people became dependent on information

creates new relationships. New spaces are emerging. The information spreads fast and without control. In all that chaos, there are least of quality information. Information is required - more and as soon as possible. In shortage of real and checked news and content, fake and unverified information is served. Insisting on accurate and professional journalism with clear public interest is the only recipe for success and survival in this chaos.

> In that context, what is the public interest?

All that matters for a society to function normally. The public interest is for the information to be available, timely and accurate, and for the journalist to publish it regardless of who and what it is about.


The media in BiH is working solely in the interest of their ordering parties, which are the politicians and financiers. Here nobody is interested in the public interest.

There is another, global, problem. The market is built to counts clicks, count ratings that are pushed by cheap entertainment content which numbs everything else. The market is rigged so you can't strive towards the public interest. On the other hand, the society didn't create the system to enable the journalism that protects the public interest to work without obstacles. We have no funds, we have no support systems for such media outlets and journalists.

That is a global problem. Journalism in the service of the public interest is disappearing and what is being created is an atmosphere where entertainment is exclusive and sole interest of the public.

> Sanja Kljajic

Regular correspondent for the public service Deutsche Welle (DW) and collaborator of several media outlets in the country and the region; vice president of the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia; recipient of several awards, including the award for ethics and courage "Dusan Bogavac". She worked as a journalist-reporter for the Current Affairs of the Radio-Television Vojvodina (RTV) until 2016, when she resigned because of censorship.



> Resigning because of censorship is not a common occurrence in Serbia. How did it happen?

I resigned in a very specific situation, after the dismissal of several dozens of editors and hosts and after numerous protests this caused and that we had organized along with the Novi Sad citizens and the local support from all over Serbia. After all that, we stayed to work in the newsroom, but we were given simpler assignments. One day I got an assignment to write a story how there was work in Serbia, while the problem was the people who didn't want to work. It was unacceptable. Especially at the time when we had a scandal about workers wearing diapers because they had no right to a restroom break, about women workers who kept fainting in a factory because it was stuffy, etc. There is a question, even if there are similar jobs, why isn't anyone taking them? It is their right not to work, but you cannot say that they are lazy, which was the goal of that story. I made an agreement with editors to do an analysis and give a wider picture. So they agreed to it, I did the

story, but it was never broadcasted. For me that was the trigger to try and push something until the end in that atmosphere of a changed editorial policy. It was obviously about censorship, because it was unacceptable to say on the public service that something was happening in the factories that had been subsidized in order to have them here in Serbia employing all these people. I was never given an answer and I resigned with a clear explanation, stating that it is obvious that there is censorship in the RTV.

> Is there a difference between the job you did at the RTV and the work you're doing today as a freelancer?

Basically, even today I work for a public media service, albeit a German one. It makes me happy that certain principals of journalism are the same. The difference is visible in the stories I can work on in this freedom. I suggest the topics I think we should work on. I approach them in the way I think they should be done and I have a strong support from the editors in that regard. What I can work on at DW, which was not the case at RTV, are society issues that our media lack – here an ordinary person, an individual is invisible because we are all burdened by daily politics and corruption. We need to address these issues, there's no doubt about that, but by focusing on corruption, we're losing the sight of these ordinary people who greatly depend on the media, on what we will do and on the system as a whole. They are the direct consequence of the system, which we could put on display in order to show the broader public what is going on.

The difference is in the attitude of the DW toward the Serbian foreign policy. In this media outlet, I went, for the first time, to Kosovo to work on the stories with a

colleague from Albania, which was impossible at the RTV. Even though the RTV addressed the issues of the war and the post-war policies, we were biased. It wasn't until the DW that I got a chance to work with someone, let's say, from the "other side", to work on a story together in order to show this other side and, as much as it is possible, the whole picture.

> Were those your greatest challenges or were there others in your career? I suppose that your trip to Kosovo has brought out many unconscious stereotypes imposed by the society.

I've had several such situations. And yes, one of them was this trip to Kosovo. I'm not trying to hide that, especially in my childhood and during school when I was raised to hate everyone around myself, I had confrontations with my feelings, while being aware that it was not rational. I was raised in the right-wing spirit; left-wing was my choice.

That is why I had different dilemmas – who are people who live in Kosovo, my stereotype images of them, situations I couldn't deal with because I thought that someone hated me. I started from what's inside, which is hard to fight and I was afraid it might influence my work, that I might convey something wrong. In Serbia, it is enough to give a wrong movie title or open up a certain topic and be guilty for doing so, like we have been by addressing the issue about rape of women during the war in Kosovo, where we focused on how Kosovo treated its own victims. Another situation was when I did an interview with Ksenija Radovanović, who got hit during the festival BeFem. Then we were accused of lack of professionalism by Sergej Trifunovic, an actor and a politician, from whose entourage the men who hit her had come. In that

regard, I have doubts every day, but these are the two situations where I wasn't sure.


> You have mentioned the protests for protection of the RTV. We always have a doubt about the line between activism and journalism. Can a journalist be an activist or not, do these two things intertwine, where is the line between the two? How do you look at that period now, after everything?

I haven't solved that dilemma yet. I still claim that journalism in itself is activism. I talked to a colleague from Montenegro, who doesn't work as a journalist anymore, because there's no place to work. I invited her to come to Belgrade. She had a good career and there are always more opportunities in a bigger town. She told me: "I didn't enroll into journalism school to change Serbia, but to change Montenegro."


So, it is one motivation. I know a huge number of colleagues who proved themselves in this profession, who are my idols and who had started out motivated by activism and not because they thought that journalism was objective and independent. This idea about independent and objective journalism should be questioned, because what is independent, objective? We always see things in a context; information by itself doesn't mean much. These things are in a gray area, and so are activism and journalism.

In my case, I think we went too far when we backed up the candidacy of a former National Ombudsman Sasa Jankovic for the presidential elections. Seen from this perspective, a few years later, that was a step too far. At that moment, it was a step of rebellion against the system that forced us to go out in the street and defend our media

outlet and our profession. Again, it all depends upon the context. At that time, it seemed acceptable if it was wrapped up in vocabulary that sounds like a support for the principle and not the man himself. From this perspective, it seems that it was a political engagement. The question is what our motivation is for doing this job. My motivation is to change this society. That is the same motivation the activists have.



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> How do you see journalism today?

I'm a big fan of public media services. I honestly believe that they are the pillar of the media scene in any country. This idea hasn't been well developed but I'm convinced that it could put media on the right path again.

However, I see a complete opposite, depressing picture where self-promotion is important as is the number of followers, but not the information itself. It really seems to me that journalists want above all to make stars out of themselves. Journalism is not a profession leading to stardom; it should protect the society and each individual. I wish the media developed in the direction of the public services. Today, we have a completely opposite picture.

> Does this situation leave enough room for professional integrity?

I don't believe that journalistic integrity is the key problem of the media in Serbia. I believe that the problems lie on the other side. Maybe it is a good thing that the situation is what it is with numerous problems and pres-

sure from all sides, in order to make it obvious where the professional integrity is.

> What are the main problems?


I'm not sure what to put first. Maybe false impersonation, because it seems to me that a good portion of the problem derives from the fact that anybody can be a journalist, various propagandists, those who work for someone else's interests. Those are not journalists. The problem comes from the fact that we have quasi-journalists working in tabloid newsrooms that are not real newsrooms in the journalistic sense, but rather pro-regime pamphlets. Those who are not media professionals, not even in the largest sense of the word, but rather semi-skilled people working for other people's interests, occupy important positions where decisions about media policies are made. This creates a string of problems. Here's what happens on the local level: there is a form of obedient journalism that asks no questions. If we start from the fact that there are no professionals in the positions where there should be, then it causes all the other problems.

The first problem I faced was the support in the newsroom, support from editors. We are returning again to those in leading positions. If they are ready to protect their journalists in the field, then it is easier for those in the field and they feel bolder when it comes to asking questions of the public interest. Everything is easier when you know that the newsroom is backing you up. When you are alone, then it is the question of your motivation and whether we have the support or not depends on whether the newsroom is financially independent and free from the centers of power.


I am very resentful of my colleagues too, for whom it could be said that they possess professional integrity, but who sell it in exchange for social network popularity. I'm angry with all the professionals that participate in this ruckus on social networks, because it seems to me that in this cacophony of opinions it is very difficult to be sure of the credibility of information sources. We ourselves participate in this. What I see on social media is that there are not many journalists who are there to pass along information credibly in the fastest possible way. They are there to show how omnipresent they are, how they ask questions in the name of the citizens. They are there to create a brand for themselves and not to inform citizens. I think that we need to put the things back on the level of self-criticism. We ourselves don't work well. And then we'll see where to start in order to help the citizens recognize good sources of information.

> Do the media work in the public interest?

I wouldn't want to generalize. In Serbia there are both types of media, those that work in the state policy interest, whatever it may be, and those that work in the public interest, however they define it. One group thinks that the work of the public interest is the fight against corruption, pointing out the errors in the system, while the other group pays more attention to problems in the society or of an individual. The third group deals with facing the past. Those are small islands



Solidarity with every individual in the country is the nearest thing to the public interest, as we see it in the field



that show that not everything is dark, but the propaganda and the pro-regime media are louder.

Sometimes, journalists themselves have to define the public interest. If the citizens lack interest for politics, then journalists are those who have to ask questions even though the citizens are indifferent. They need to ask questions in the name of every individual who is alone, unprotected from the system and suffering injustice. Solidarity with every individual in the country is the nearest thing to the public interest, as we see it in the field.

> Boro Kontic

Director of the Media Center in Sarajevo, author of Primus, a radio program where “The Top List of the Surrealists” first got started; chief editor of the Youth program and, later on, of the Second Program of the Radio Sarajevo; president of the Independent Union of Professional Journalists of BiH (2003-2004) and recipient of several international awards for radio and television documentaries, as well as the prize Jug Grizelj for the accomplishments in investigative journalism.




The broadest definition of integrity implies that journalists should act in the public interest. The media and journalists who abide by this are few and far between. We live in a system where media have long become platforms for business and that means that a media outlet is founded to protect the owner's interests, which differ from the political to financial ones. Journalism has now moved to the social media, where there is an abundance of different interests. There are people who have more followers than any daily or a weekly journal. The media are using social networks, but I'm not sure that they are using them as effectively as individuals or those who are focused on using each

What is the public interest?

The interest to get information, which enables me to make a choice. For instance, how to vote or find a new living space. The public interest is to get information so that you can understand the world you live in, to understand how things develop. Most of the time, you don't get a tenth of this information.

He who wants to abide by the key principles of the media integrity (verifying facts, multiple sources, searching for truth) sometimes looks like a man in a deep cave trying to stay clean, proper and washed every day



media message for their own interests. We live in cutthroat times when different centers take great care about the information and its movement.

He who wants to abide by the key principles of the media integrity (verifying facts, multiple sources, searching for truth) sometimes looks like a man in a deep cave trying to stay clean, proper and washed every day.

> You have said that there are certain media that manage to fight all the above mentioned. How?

In part, those are the media that receive a certain international support and are independent. Their financial problems are solved and so they can dedicate themselves to what their work should be. Twenty-five years ago, the key mantra was the independent journalism. Everybody was talking about it. It is interesting that few are those who still use that word, now we have a new one – investigative journalism. This concept has replaced the need for independent journalism. There are a few such media outlets in the BiH. It is a very small circle, with CIN, Zurnal, BIRN and Istraga. There are a few honest portals that try to report without manipulation and forced sensationalism, like the Radio Sarajevo and some others. However, BiH is specific in comparison to the other countries in the region, because it has preserved the public media, which should, by definition, protect the public interest.

Public services, like the media financed by the general public, should have a program that is focused on that public. Out of 140 radio stations, 62 are public, I think. The public outlets represent one third of the television stations, 12 to 15. All of these stations are more or less under some kind of political control.

We have fought to preserve the public service. In these discussions and confrontations, you see two approaches. There are people on the outside who understand the media and are interested in the survival of the public service. Without them, we would be at the mercy of commercial campaigns, which would use us for their own ends. They would show and broadcast anything they like, which is mostly not aligned with the public interest, which is the most important. However, I have noticed that when we fight so that the employees of these services can do their jobs, which serve the community, they appreciate it, but they do not see that we demand that the public services fulfill their function. For them, this represents only the fight for their jobs, so that they could survive. We had a case where the state public service didn't have the means or possibilities to broadcast the European Football Championship. It was taken by a cable company. It turned out that one part of the country wouldn't have been able to watch it, unless they had switched to that cable provider. They use the European Championship in order to further their economic interests, while the public service gives it for free to all the people, all over the BiH. This difference illustrates what would happen to us if we lose all the public services – we would be left at the mercy of the private interest which is unscrupulous.

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spent your money”, and then give an analysis on what they did and show the public what was done with that money.

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> What are the most common problems that professional journalists face in BiH?

Everywhere in the world, but especially here in BiH, journalism is a humiliated profession. I think that an average salary for a journalist is about 300 USD, which is lower than the national average. Most of these journalists live and work in insecurity, without permanent employment, mostly working under contract. A hardworking person, especially someone with a family, will hardly chose this profession, because it is so insecure. It can no longer fulfill the basic needs. The fact is that it never could. Even in the eighties, when I was starting out, salaries were low. Except, those were different times when almost all the salaries were low, so the journalists' salaries did not stand out. Nowadays, they painfully do. No one can expect from someone to work, to confront the environment,

to receive threats, to put up with the economic lobbying, while being poorly paid. This political and financial pressure is huge. Definitions of independent journalism always say that the independent journalism is journalism that is not under political or financial pressures. Unfortunately, our media are under a great political pressure. It is subtle, but there are many ways to discipline people and the economic situation is awful.

The state gives away a lot of money for the media. The Media Center has done a study, which showed that the state grants more money than it is the media's marketing pie. Of course, this money is directed towards the obedient media. This combination of the political pressure, which comes when necessary, and the economic one, which is present on daily basis, turns journalism into an irrelevant profession with no appeal.

> What is the basic difference between a job in public and in privately owned media? Have you maintained your professional integrity by leaving the public and private BiH media?


I left the public service in 1994, because I saw that it had been taken over by the Party of Democratic Action. I left in November, 1994 and in February that same year a member of that party had been appointed the chairwoman of the board; a woman with no prior knowledge or experience in the media, but she obviously thought

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that she was a godsend for everything because of that membership. It was immediately clear to me that it would be impossible to survive there, to do the job the way it should be done.

The war is a catastrophe in itself, but in this context it means death for journalism. Whoever says that the media



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independence exists in a war is wrong. Only officers, black marketeers and professional patriots benefit from it. The demands imposed on journalism are such that you can meet them only by losing your integrity. The problem is that these demands do not come from the political sphere or the army, but the public as a whole, including the family. A war is the tem-

perature of burning of everything that is healthy.

You have very clear signals, ranging from military to political, asking of you that patriotism, even more, which contradicts the profession. In such circumstances, I realized that it was impossible to create something without someone, who doesn't know the rules of the profession and has never done a radio or television program, explaining to you what that should look like. In my opinion, it's against common sense. No type of editorial discipline can stand speeches coming from an ignoramus who is explaining how you should do the work you've been doing for over twenty years.

After six months, the Media Center came along. I took it over and that is where I have stayed to this day. Ninety

percent of our budget comes, not from the taxpayers, but from projects and the international market. In fact, we bring huge amounts of money into BiH and we pay taxes. The dramatic thing is that whenever we ask the government for money, we can't get it. Each year we pay from 100 to 150 thousand Euros in taxes, about six million marks. In 25 years, we have got maybe 50 thousand Euros. Our position is dramatic and so is how one feels in that political system. This is the price we pay for being an independent organization. We have a good reputation in BiH and abroad.

The position of an independent institution that wants to be professional and decent in everything, is binding. The price you pay among other things is the inability to get some money from the state you yourself are amply financing every year.

The Media Center started off as a small coaching institution. Nowadays, we are doing more things and I think that we are a decent and professional firm in an indecent environment.

> What have you learned from the film "Years Eaten by Lions" about the propaganda and warmongering during the wars in Yugoslavia? You have talked to the people who had been the direct victims of that propaganda and who had seriously paid for their faith in it.

I have learned a defeating truth – the fact that you are a warmonger and a propagandist won't change a thing in your life, on the contrary. If you stay loyal to the side you did the warmongering for, you will be some sort of a hero, an honest citizen. You will only have a problem if you turn against your own side. In our case, that meant the nationalist propaganda. If you turn against the

nationalist propaganda, you will become someone who stays on the margins of the society. Those who were the leaders became a part of the national corpus. Sometimes heroes, sometimes university professors... My findings, after this, are dramatically defeating. You have an example of Feral Tribune, the magnificent weekly from Split, whose founders and journalists had managed to pass all the exams in the most difficult field, the field of addressing their own crimes and got wiped off from the media world in Croatia.

In the socialist era, you had also these loyal journalist-functionaries, and they are useful in this system too.

Loyalty is indestructible and an attempt to change something will always make huge problems for you. The most valuable upside is that the only thing left is the rebellion, the only valuable thing when you want to change something.

Great journalism never dies.

> Right after the war, during a meeting in Spain, you were in a group of media workers who asked of the European Federation of Journalists to investigate the role of journalists in the nineties wars. However, that request was refused.

The then Union of Independent Journalists of BiH offered to investigate the role of journalists in the nineties wars. We were refused. Even though there were people who supported this, the majority thought that it was not up to journalists to investigate their colleagues, that this was not a good practice.

This initiative failed, but a recommendation to analyze somehow the journalist practices in the war, remained. After that, we lost our momentum a bit. We always

needed someone to work their fingers to the bone, to sit and dig, and so on. The enthusiasm was lost a bit. I made that film and there were bigger and smaller investigative stories. We missed our chance to do a big analysis of the war propaganda and of the examples of warmongering journalism, some of which were horrible. You have an example of the radio-television, which was founded by the Serbian Democratic Party at Pale and which was the military-political center for the propaganda during the war. One of their examples, which I put in the title, is the “discovery” that the Serbs are being thrown to the caged lions. What’s really horrible is that this television station is still doing the same thing or something similar. It remained a political tool for achieving media goals.

The propaganda is maybe not so much a creation of the journalists and the media. It is most often a product of the whole atmosphere created by the politics, intellectual elite and different lobbies that always find a way to corner journalism and use it for the benefit of their orientation. Journalists didn’t make nearly as many statements as the politicians. I want to say that the media are just the tip of the iceberg, while a huge mass of a social contract lies almost invisible beneath the surface.

> In one interview, you have said that the journalism you once practiced doesn’t exist anymore. Based on your whole experience, if you were to choose your career again, would you still opt for journalism?

It’s absurd, but this is an ideal time for journalism. It’s fantastic to see all the technical possibilities that people have now. I worked in times when we didn’t have a fax or a copy machine and when a telephone had a rotary dial, not that there were many of them. The speed with which I

can find, verify and compare the information is amazing. It is fascinating how quickly I can check the facts (from word meanings to information about the past or from archives, etc.), using the books I have at home and the notorious internet, endless it may be with all of its faults and dangers. This is the right time for anyone who wants to be a journalist. Not to mention how I had to rent a tape recorder and now I can record anything with my phone and send it in a few minutes.

One can do anything alone, without depending on too many people. In the end, you do not even need a media outlet. If we weren't living in these times, they should have been invented for the sake of journalism.

Of course, there are burdens. Pressures are getting stronger. Back in the day, the politics stayed away from the spot-light. If something got published, hue and cry got raised. There were urgent sessions of the Municipal, Republic and even of the Central Committee for just one story. This means that the world of politics feared journalistic stories. They used big guns for the faintest of rustles. Nowadays, you can publish whatever you want, maybe not in the main media, but there is always a station you can use to publish what you want and they won't lift a finger. They do not get upset too much. Once upon a time, a journalistic article had some weight, today not so much, because they have PR mechanisms in place to make any story senseless, to make it pale, bland and almost invisible. You can publish whatever you want, but there's no one to listen.


> While you were working as a journalist at Radio Sarajevo, what was the most challenging situation you faced?

There was always a problem whether or not you would be able to say the things you wanted to say or to find a form to say it, without triggering the first echelon of the ideological control. Things got published there. Editors were partially responsible for the quality, but their primary role was to block what shouldn't be published. The saddest thing of all is that some excellent professionals worked there.


However, in BiH there was the Agrokomerc scandal (August, 1987), after which we could start to “breathe”. Not all of us, but Omladinski took a chance and freed itself. That generation literarily widened the space of the media freedoms, ranging from openness towards listeners, to insisting on “digging up” everything about a certain topic. Later on, they created their media on these foundations. It turned out that when you once win this freedom, it is hard for you to accept something less. Once you discover this “grain of doubt”, it's a whole different ballgame.

I regret not having recorded more often people who participated in the Second

World War and the partisan fight. I edited a few stories, but they were mostly parades, propaganda programs and not intimate stories of these people. I stayed away from it, due to everything I mentioned, but now I regret it. I regret, for instance, not recording dozens of people like Osman Djikić, the SFRY ambassador, who died when the war in BiH ended. I was a friend and colleague of his wife,



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Vojka Djikic. About 10-15 years later, she asked me to get a book from their library. I went upstairs looking for this book when I came across a memorial plaque. I took a closer look. It was a memorial plaque reserved only for the participants of the battle of Sutjeska, issued on its 20th anniversary in 1963 and personally signed by Tito.

When I think about it now, I talked with him dozens of times, we spent time together and I never addressed this subject. I regret very much not doing these things. There are many untold stories left, but somehow a man can get confused and overwhelmed by the grandeur that is expected when talking about certain topics. It's far better to find these small, personal stories, because they are the only ones that survive. All the splendid stories get lost in that grandeur, but small stories about people who tried and sometimes succeeded in changing the world, somehow survive. A man is always smarter afterwards. I always say: "Record people that is the only way to save something". When Davorin Popovic, the front man of the great Yugoslav and BiH band died, it turned out that there was not a single big interview of his left. Somewhere in there, there is a small part of the definition of integrity. Don't let the people end up without the story of their lives. Time is definitely running out, everything should be recorded.

> Did these stories become small during the time of nationalistic politics?

There are no small stories. All life stories, all real documents are in fact big. I don't know who, but somebody said that a monument should be given to anyone who "keeps their right mind" after having lived for a few decades. In the journalistic sense, it means to record their memories and keep them as a document.

> Is there a way for the profession to fight the war propaganda and hate speech, taking into account the experiences of the wars in Yugoslavia?

Of course there is. One of the ways is to strictly observe the rules of the profession. Everything must be checked. All sources must be used and all participants should be given space. One of the definitions of news is that it is the first draft of history. The way we report today will be information about our times for others. Our present day's misunderstandings, misapprehensions and generally speaking a public confusion are a part of the fact that we know very little about our past and what we do know is mostly wrong. Let's tell the truth to our future readers, only the truth and nothing but the truth. But those are just "big words". Not lying will do.

> Tatjana Lazarevic

Editor of the KoSSev portal, she was declared the person of the year 2018 by the weekly “Vreme”. The same year, the KoSSev portal newsroom won the award “Dusan Bogavac” for ethics and courage. She is the recipient of the “Stanislav Stasa Marinkovic”award for courage and exceptional achievements in investigative and analytical journalism, given by the daily “Danas”.



> How hard is it to manage a professional media outlet in the north of Kosovo? What are the major issues?

It is hard, but I don't think about it. My job here entails, a deep concentration and reinforced focus on the newsroom and outer environment all the time, because we work in a system that is legally disorganized, politically burdened and institutionally barren, with additional specificities of a society with intertwined administrative systems and burdened by ethnic conflict, with weakened capacities.

The main issues are:

- a lack of human resources (and all other problems that arise from it, like long work hours, no free time, lack of possibilities for the portal to develop further and improve its contents. As an editor I am faced with a big problem. Due to the endless hours consecrated to the

portal and the newsroom, my work as an editor suffers, since there are always urgent simple journalists tasks that I need to tend to).

- a lack of security, above all lack of the protection by institutions (not only that none of the incidents or crimes committed against us was further investigated, but we never got any information about the phase of the criminal proceedings or if there were any proceedings at all, including shooting at our offices – 11 bullets had been fired, burning of our car, threats to my family, cyber and DDOS attacks, my arrest, several physical attacks on our journalists, written threats etc.)
- withholding information, being ignored by the majority of the central institutions, their representatives and officials, exclusion of our media outlet from the communication with the institutions led by the Serbian list (the leading political force in the north of Kosovo that has a part of the parliamentary majority in the Kosovo Assembly, Ed.)
- unstable finances – small newsrooms in Kosovo are registered as NGOs and depend on project financing. Operating grants are rare and application is often conditioned by donors' politics

There is a climate of social lawlessness of a chaotic place, of a dying town, a community on a verge of collapse, highly criminalized surroundings and a devastated area, in which there are fear, silence, hopelessness and arrogance, lack of consciousness of greater good, responsibility and insisting on personal freedoms. That is the hardest thing, for me personally.

> You have worked for a long time for other media outlets. Why have you decided to found your own?

My experiences in other media outlets were short-lived, because all of them, except one, were not journalist but politically controlled newsrooms. I would leave them as soon as I became aware of that. I didn't insist on continuing to work as a journalist in other media outlets during the nineties, because I had learned, as a young person, that journalism is seen only as a social and political involvement, in this case for the government. I dedicated myself fully to journalism when we started KoSSev in 2014. That is why we founded it, to produce media content without the control of any influential group or individuals on one hand and on the other, to bridge the gap of the information blackout and the propaganda in connection to the, at that time, topical Brussels process (negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo in Brussels, Ed.) and the events of the utmost importance for the local community.

On integrity

For me, integrity means the truth and the public. There is no compromise with the truth.

> You have managed to become known in the whole region? How popular are you among the local audience?

I think that we are the most relevant media for the local audience, despite the “handicap” concerning the fact that we are present only online. However, at the beginning, our work had been followed by another kind of an audience – international representatives, diaspora, expert communities in Serbia and later on in the region and nowadays more and more in all of Kosovo.

> You started working as a journalist before the war in Kosovo. How much has the media image changed in the meantime?

Compared to the nineties, nowadays the media have more liberty in their work. However, if we talk about the Serbian population, the process of maturing and improving of the journalist professional community, growth of the younger generations of journalists, I'd say that very little has changed. Young and educated people are leaving Kosovo. Those who give it a try and learn certain skills, acquire knowledge and confidence, widen their horizons, do not stick around for long and the work in a newsroom requires continuity. There are nice examples in Kosovo that bring about a breath of fresh air and certain vitality to our small community. KoSSev is certainly one of them. After us, a few nice and versatile media initiatives were started and now there are also podcasts. What's more, some of the women journalists who had started here with us, have opened their own sites and outlets.

I'd like to think that we have raised the bar when it comes to professional standards, but also when it comes to expectations of the broader public and our audience, that they too have learned about the media content from us and others.

These changes were visible right after the war, during the first wave of the international support, when other media projects were started. A certain number of these radio and television stations is still operating today.

The other side of the coin is that the so called state media, that is, the newsrooms are controlled by the current government, making them the standard media outlets for the political parties. Media content they produce is agitprop.

Recently, in the last year, hybrid-media have entered this media constellation. These contents remind us of objective, free media, which, according to our experience represent a pseudo-replica of a successful free media outlet that is not controlled by the government.

> What are the consequences for the society of the nationalist propaganda and the incitation the people are exposed to through the main mainstream and the government media?

The so called mainstream audience that is looking for this kind of state media content is constantly exposed to the mentioned agitprop. We are talking about years of this. Expectedly, the majority of this audience believes in the truthfulness of these lies, half-lies, deliberate, one-sided news and spins. A general and unalterable contextual content has been established that represents the ultimate truth for the consumers of that kind of news. They believe in their own elitist individuality and self-victimization; that their own nation is infallible; that

Calling things for what they are

It would be better if we, as a profession, insisted on calling things for what they are. For example, Informer and Alo are not the only tabloids. Politika and RTS can be tabloids too. We can see unprofessional articles and stories in the big media with tradition.

Maybe I am being an idealist, but I do believe that progress could be made, if we were stricter and gave more attention to human resources, if we “sold” our profession in the best possible way, by communicating with younger generations, promoting our work, if we invested in our future in that fashion. Engaging in a long-term recovery of our professional community would be an investment, even if only in the sense of building a shield around the profession itself.

they are confronted with the other as their archenemy and abuser. This is visible on the whole territory of Kosovo.

On the media scene, it not unusual to find daily, even in the respected media, a content which is a textbook example of agitation, nationalist propaganda, elements of chauvinism and of belittling attitude towards others and everything that is different.

There are specific elements as well. The Serbian community in Kosovo is powerless to avoid being used for score-settling in a highly politicized scenario of the Serbian-Kosovar/Albanian saga. That is why they have a more careful approach to the media narratives. What's more, their daily lives are the proof against these narratives.

These circumstances influence the small, I'd even say a microscopic, community of the media in the Serbian language, including us, that are not controlled by the state or any of the parties, in the sense that these outlets are finely tuned to notice these multiple narratives, these multiple realities.

> You would leave journalism and then get back to it. Why?

Media are my close environment. Media content is who I am, whether or not I have created it or just analyzed it or consumed it. Maybe it's clearer if I say that that is why I left and joined newsrooms. That is true. For me, a newsroom represents asceticism and freedom. During the nineties, when I was taking my first steps as a university graduate, I didn't have a possibility to recognize this.

> How do you fight against the propaganda?

By not being scared. I put the light on it, show it, point to it, and give it context. I'd rather show it than ignore it and

justify this decision by saying that I do not want to give it “legitimacy”.

> What is the price of being a local journalist with integrity?

I truly don't know. I don't think about it, I don't know what it is. I only know what I deprive myself of daily due to the long working hours.

> After the war, you worked in a school of journalism for children. Would you recommend today journalism as a profession to the young people?

Always. Because, a part from an education, they would gain liberty, develop critical thinking, they would learn how to recognize a value scale and further grow as defenders of the public interest, discover the importance of the written and spoken word, develop communication skills and penetrate into the significance of truth – I'd say enter the treasury of everything that we are missing nowadays. Especially to them, as a sensitive generation, currently developing its character and reaching maturity to be able to lead its society.

> You are often exposed to different threats, you have even been arrested. Has it made you doubt yourself and the work you are doing?

No. I don't give it much thought, not more than to find a way to minimize the possibility for error in my work.

> Besar Likmeta

Editor for the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) in Albania since 2007, and a correspondent of Balkan Insight. He started his career in Florida Times Union in Jacksonville, Florida. He worked for Foreign Policy, Global Post, and other media outlets. Winner of the 2009 CEI/SEEMO Award for Outstanding Merits in Investigative Journalism.



■ On ethics and challenges

We have to make a clear distinction between ethics of media companies and journalists' ethics. I think that in journalists' work we can see the integrity, especially if we take into account the difficult situation that media are in, as well as people working for the media in Albania. Journalists are exposed to threats, physical assaults that remain unpunished, verbal assaults due to laws enacted by the government with the aim to control the content of the online media. The Corona virus pandemic took away a part of the majority of mainstream media's income, and consequently a part of journalists' salaries. The situation is difficult, and it requires a lot from the journalists, especially from those in the front lines - to face the threats, to continue with this work, and to serve to the public interest.

A journalist's job in the past was to find the truth, verify it, and to convey it to the public in an understandable manner. Today, they also have to deal with the algorithm that selects how the information they provide will be

A journalist's job in the past was to find the truth, verify it, and to convey it to the public in an understandable manner. Today, they also have to deal with the algorithm that selects how the information they provide will be distributed

distributed. They have no control over the means of distribution. Large companies that own the major global social networks, like Facebook, Twitter and others, they have that control. For a journalist, this a completely new environment in which they have to learn how to function, as they previously had to face the threats that stemmed from political and economic interests.

The main problem in Albania is that professional journalism is very rare. It requires certain market conditions and a journalist who sticks to professional standards. Also, it requires a functional media environment. All this must be present, together with integrity and ethics. Without these requirements, that are necessary for the prosperity of media pluralism, we cannot have professional journalism. Speaking of Albania, many of these conditions do not exist. We do not have media pluralism and a functional media market. We are under great pressure from political and economic interests.

We are threatened by organized crime. We are threatened by media owners who force journalists into self-censorship, due to their economic and political interests. We are threatened by high-ranked political parties.

■ On propaganda and algorithms

We are struggling with access to information since the Law on Free Access to Information does not clearly apply to all institutions in the same way. We have limited access to the officials, who do not communicate directly with reporters but tend to communicate via social media. Therefore, we are dealing with a lot of propaganda and spin planted to journalists. We have time-related issues. We do not have resources to fight against an army of bots hired by political parties and the government, or the propaganda they produce.

There is also the abovementioned problem of distribution via social network algorithms. Changes in Facebook's reach and algorithm may affect how the articles are distributed and read. In the last few years, Facebook repeatedly reduced the usual page reach to increase the ad revenue. That made many publishers focus on likable articles, short posts packed with images, and very little detailed content.

Albanian media scene is in a period of big changes. We are drifting away from the inherited media, such as television and newspapers that are slowly dying out, and we are increasingly turning to social network media, which places the propaganda issue into a new focus.

■ On journalism

I have chosen journalism by coincidence. I got a degree in philosophy, then started taking journalism classes, and realized that I was interested in the subject, and that it could be something that I would want to do until the rest of my life: to tell stories, build narrations, and inform people on the important issues. Every young journalist most certainly read inspirational journalism cases. At the very


beginning, journalism is a romantic idea that you can change the world, although you know you are changing yourself. You begin to realize what the profession actually is when you start to investigate facts, to build research, to publish stories. You grow with them. Therefore, I am in journalism by pure coincidence, but that may have been the right choice.

I began my career as an intern at the Florida Times Union. I gained some experience by working there for two years. I was mostly a reporter for the online issue, which is why I did a lot of video back in 2003 and 2004. The online videos were new at that time. I worked on video recordings, reported from the community. When I returned to Albania, it was one of the most practical things that I actually knew, so journalism was a natural choice. But the learning process is still in progress, even today.


I was lucky. I work in a professional and good newsroom like BIRN. I think that hardships in journalism are always there. The profession is hard everywhere, not only in Albania, to be honest. I don't think that Albania is different from other countries around the globe. I certainly spoke about the hardships local media are facing, since I mostly worked as a correspondent, and then I became an editor, so I would say that it is no different in the USA. It is a profession that requires long hours, a lot of commitment, passion, sacrifice, but at the same time is also very useful.

Investigative journalism, which we practice at BIRN, is full of possibilities. To practice investigative journalism means to practice high-quality journalism, because in a certain sense it is the very essence of journalism. Doing that in Albania is no harder than in other countries.

The mainstream media are not very interested in quality investigative journalism that complies with the ethical standards. On the contrary, there is a culture of tabloidizing the investigative journalism. There are really good journalists in Albania, but bad media outlets. On one hand, you have the lack of meritocracy, the media outlet owners do not need professional journalism. On the other hand, journalists failed to build on their abilities, capacities as investigative journalists, since the main requirement had been to follow the editorial scope, sometimes influenced by a political party, in order to correspond to political and economic interests of the media owner. Therefore, journalists are not expected to develop big stories, since the request does not originate from the readers, which in our case are mostly politicians. The audience of the majority of media in Albania consists mostly of politicians. The media have a predefined agenda, political interest, instead of informing their readers. I think that the overall environment is an obstacle for good investigative journalism, but that does not kill the journalist's desire to expose the truth.



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■ **On safety**

We take safety very seriously. We are trying to evaluate it every time we report on something. Most certainly, when you are trying to expose a subject of great interest, you are never completely safe. You are not physically safe, not psychologically safe from stress you may experience, you are

not safe from a possible law suit. There are various types of threats that may affect the work of journalists, and they are always present. Every time, you have to evaluate the importance of a story and find a balance, as difficult as it may be.

■ On consequences

Once, a member of the Parliament attacked me while I was trying to offer him an opportunity to respond to findings of an investigation related to his false academic background, and to hear his side of the story of an affair. Yes, I reported the instance to prosecutors, but the witnesses never responded.

Threats happen to all Albanian journalists. We are getting back to the question of the integrity, the commitment of journalists who deal with difficult topics on daily basis, without pretending to be heroes, or making themselves part of the story, which is how they defend the position that the truth has to be conveyed as objectively as possible, which is in the public interest of readers, your online audience and TV viewers.

There are hard, long days when you feel powerless, exhausted, you feel worn out. This is not an easy profession, and you certainly have your doubts. The thing that keeps me going is working in an excellent organization, with journalists and editors who are truly professional, as well the possibility to help other colleagues in the country to pursue their mission. These are the reasons I am still in this profession.

■ On expectations and reality

The expectations that the investigations we publish would be resolved in court, seem wrong to me. From

that perspective, journalists are not there just to discover the truth and inform the public, but also to build cases in front of a criminal court, and thus change the world, whereas the heroes of our stories should be punished. If a journalist had that power, if the truth had that power, in any case, it would have been too much to bear. If we do our job professionally, if we present the truth to the public, it would in the long run affect the anti-corruption measures. The society would become less corrupted, which has been proven. There are stories that have had an impact. However, just because you tell the truth, you can't expect that its effect comes easily, because that doesn't depend on the media, but on the state institutions. Therefore, with all troubles, I think that the media play an important role in the fight against corruption, but all pieces of the puzzle have to be there in order for a change to happen. You need a strong civil society, independent courts, free elections. Even if you have all that, it is still very difficult to fight against corruption. But if you have a small number of media outlets, and journalists who professionally practice journalism, to be honest, the expectations should be based on reality.

On public interest

It is very clearly defined – correct information is the most important for the public. This is the information that the government usually either hides or manufactures but doesn't want it out in the public. That is, for example, the information on the taxes they pay. Usually, it is easier for us to recognize what isn't the public interest, then what is. I don't think it is a problem to realize what the public interest is. Defending it is the hardest part.

■ On stereotypes and international media

Unfortunately, what I learned working as a correspondent for international media is that their reports are packed with clichés, especially those dealing with small countries. Search through the BBC and you will see that in the last 20 years they had 15 stories about blood feud, and that they are all the same. Very oriental, like the Balkan mentality never left the Middle Ages. As a correspondent, you are trying to give an insight to someone in Kansas or Great Britain for example, and their understanding of

the external world is very narrow, so what we call the international media aims the American, British, Italian or German audience. Those are not, in fact, the international media. Sometimes, it is very difficult for a correspondent, especially one coming from our culture, to clarify the complexity of the society we live in. The editors are not interested in that. They are interested in the stereotypes that their audience can easily understand, and that somehow makes sense. That was the reason why I wanted to contribute to the local media, to work with

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journalists locally, to report about the stories and events that my neighbors read, actually. So, it is very challenging, and I dare say I find it difficult for one to balance all these

details, when you work for the media outlets communicating with the audience abroad.

■ **On fear**

The situation in Albania is difficult, which has been confirmed by all the international media freedom monitoring organizations. Physical assaults on journalists go unpunished. We have verbal assaults of the prime minister directed to the media, tabloidization, problems with the media outlets owners, their political and economic interests, which all affect the quality of journalism. We have problems with the transparency of media financing. Recently, we had a situation when the property of a media outlet owner had been seized due to possible connections with organized crime. We have a lot of problems that are also present in other countries, but I think that the European Union decided to look away when it comes to freedom of media in Albania. For that reason, more attention should be paid to it, because the situation is not easy for journalists. Our mission is to enable professional journalism, since in this environment without appropriate training for journalists, without interest in high-quality reporting, I think that the tradition will disappear over maximum of ten years. That is my greatest fear. You will not have professional reporting, for this journalism culture will be erased, everything will be reduced to clicks and click-bates. We only want the professional journalism to survive. I don't know if we can accomplish that, but at least we expect professional journalists to remain in the profession, despite the environment, and during these difficult times. Not to dive into something different, as many did over the last decades.

> Fatos Lubonja

One of the leading Albanian journalists, writers and fighters for human rights. He was a political prisoner during the regime of Enver Hoxha. His books are translated into English. He is the recipient of the SEEMO Award for Mutual Cooperation in South East Europe in 2004.



EU VS PROMISED LAND: For my generation, Europe was the promised land. After the fall of Communism, transition narrative was built on this promise. In the nineties, the journal *Përparësi*, which I founded in 1994, had a column 'Transitology' with the works of different authors who wrote about the roads to take through the desert in order to reach that promised land. Today, I am critical of this narrative, even though it is dominant in the European Union and Albania alike. According to this storyline Europe had reached the end of history, while the countries, like ours, were still moving towards it. Today, I see the European Union heading in the wrong direction, while the former communist countries, in their search for it, are heading in the even worse. I will give you a media-related example. Owing to that storyline, the model for the media in the nineties Albania was the Mediset of the former Italian President Silvio Berlusconi. In the beginning, we, intellectuals and journalists, were a part of the privately owned media, thinking that our job was to create the editorial policy and publicly express our ideas, used by the owners to make a lot of money in the free market. However, very soon we were forced to play

the role of slaves to these owners or leave. Today, media are the most powerful instrument in the hands of the ruling oligarchs and organized crime in Albania. In the meantime, Europe is expressing concern about certain laws adopted by the government to limit the freedom of media, as was the case recently with the Law against Defamation, but it is less worried or not at all about the conflict of interest inside the triangle of the “political – financial – media power” that rules here. Countries like Albania are a mirror for the European countries to see themselves in a cartoonish reflection. However, they refuse to look.

LITERATURE VS JOURNALISM: Ever since my youth, literature was my passion. During my 17 years in prison, the idea that one day I would be able to write down what happened to me, gave a sense to my suffering. I have lived this passion to this very day. In the meantime, one of the lessons I learned, from this sad experience, was that we have to fight so that our children could live in a place where they feel free to think and act, and not like it was for us. This is what led me to act as engaged intellectual, who fights, mostly through journalism, to change the direction that power assigns to the world we live in.

So, I live as a writer and a journalist in two different times and on two different spiritual levels. When I write my prison stories, I feel calmer. It is not my intention to change myself or fight against something that is happening at present time, but to understand and describe what I lived through. When I turn to journalism, I sometimes feel as if I were living the Chinese curse: “May you live in interesting times”, which does not allow you to dig deeper into meaning of things. Commenting a passage from the scriptures about a terrible storm at sea

ending with “But God was not there”, the author Umberto Eco says: “Because God is in the depth of things”.

However, I do not think that a writer should run away to sea depths and not live through the storms of the surface. You can reach the depths only through the surface. I believe that even a reader needs both – momentary, sharp reaction and analysis of a journalist and an understanding from the point of view of a writer or a philosopher. Personally, they seem complementary to me.

ALBANIA BEFORE VS ALBANIA AFTER ENVER HODXHA:

The difference is between a totalitarian and authoritarian regime. The first had a goal to control not only your existence, but your mind as well. The other controls only your existence, which is more tolerant towards your mind. However, there are other differences. In my book “Another Sentence”, I tell a story of two prisoners, two journalists who sent a letter against Enver Hoxha from the prison to the Central Committee in 1978. This letter became a reason for them to be sentenced to death by the state and executed. In Czechoslovakia, only a year earlier, Vaclav Havel a dissident at that time (the leader of the Velvet Revolution and the last president of Czechoslovakia and the first president of the Czech Republic Ed.), was sentenced to only two years for the Charter 77 manifesto that requested the fulfillment of all the principles of human rights in the country. In both cases we talk about punishing and intimidation, but as you see they are not very similar. Today, you cannot imagine that someone who writes against an authoritarian regime gets punished like these two journalists. However, it is certain that if the current leader remains in power thanks to oligarchs and organized crime, if he continues to control the justice system and the majority of media (as is the case in Albania),

journalists are bound to see other forms of punishment and intimidation, mostly related to preventing them from surviving economically, involving them in staged trials for defamation or insult and not forgetting mafia-related

assassinations, which have not happened so far. In some of my writings, I called the system we live in a “media regime”. If the former systems used the police to control us, nowadays they use the media.


FREEDOM VS PRICE: Compared to the communist past, the space for people with integrity who have the courage to think for themselves

and publically express their opinions is much bigger, but nowhere nearly big enough. Thinking means constantly questioning your own and other people’s ideas about the world. It is about a constant dialogue with yourself and others. If this dialogue does not exist or if it is stopped, then it is hard to talk about thinking in that regard and thus integrity. In a totalitarian regime, this dialogue is replaced with the dictate of the ruling party’s and its leader’s doctrine. For instance, a job of a journalist was to propagandize and paraphrase the leader and not to think. In the authoritarianism we live in, the dialogue was replaced by what Marcuse calls a “repressive tolerance”. People prone to critical thinking have the freedom to ask questions in public, but the system of power that controls the existence of the non-thinking majority does not have a dialogue with them, it tolerates and assimilates them. Of


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course, the thresholds of tolerance vary from one authoritarian regime to another.

Unfortunately, the last 30 years have not marked the process of integrity strengthening of the people in Albania. It is hard for an individual, but on the whole, we live in the system that does not foster the integrity; it destroys it. It creates a man who has no convictions, who doesn't think. Not thinking means not taking the responsibility. That kind of a person relinquishes the responsibility to an owner, a boss, a governor...



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In Albania, few journalists think for themselves and maybe even fewer are those who have the courage to say what they think because of the whole media system, which was created and serves for delegitimization of media, that is the opponents of the prime minister, who dared call the media “garbage”. A reader or a television viewer can say that they (media) all are “garbage”, this opinion I can accept. However, the man who has had a key role in the building of this media system ever since the late nineties, when he became the mayor and started giving away construction permits to media outlet owners, is the last man who should call them “garbage”.

Threats I receive because of what I say and work on always come from different sources depending on the topics I address and, unfortunately, are a part of communication and the way of life in this society. Of course, one should resist them and the best resistance is what I have already mentioned: the preservation of integrity, which is

the preservation of the capacity to think for yourself about things, which means, at the same time, the protection of personal freedom. Making concessions always leads in the end to a kind of slavery, despite the fact that you may become financially rich.

One of the most important ways for the protection of integrity is to invest in your own ideas. People invest energy to form certain opinions, thoughts about the world that they developed through learning and ideas that change them. As long as this change is authentic and develops your awareness, it is very important to you and cannot be easily sacrificed. In this context, what system does, and I think this is important to underline, is what it is said about the former authoritarianism/totalitarianism – it does not make people with beliefs, but people without them, which destroys any kind of belief. This system acts in a way to avoid having people with beliefs; it destroys them. Why? Because a man without beliefs can be more easily manipulated and more easily used and unfortunately this includes journalists too.

In other words, I can say that, in the same way that we cannot be free unless others are free, we cannot have integrity if others do not have it and in authoritarianism we live as a non-thinking majority, that is people without integrity who are predominant.

> Predrag Nikolic

*Journalist in the Montenegrin Independent Weekly Monitor,
member of the Main Board of the Trade Union of Media of
Montenegro.*



> How much is labor law respected in Montenegro?

Very little. Legally, everything is well formulated, but in practice, there's still the famous line - if you don't want to work, we'll find someone who will. The good thing is that younger population has more options to some extent, so they don't agree to work for a lousy pay, with a common mantra that they were privileged to even be "given" a job.

> What are the consequences in the media functioning?

The media, and everybody else suffer consequences, if you have employees who are unhappy with their salaries, working conditions, being in a constant state of uncertainty, you can't expect them to be too dedicated. True, the media employees can have a higher level of enthusiasm if they are passionate about the job in the sense of discovering some hidden truths and working in the public interest. It happens that journalists write about instances of violation of rights, even labor rights, yet they are the victims of it themselves and they stay silent about their experiences.

> Why do you think there is so little of it?

There's a number of reasons. Starting with that elementary, economy - when it comes to financial satisfaction, here, journalists are almost at the level of supermarket cashiers, who are in the worst positions in terms of salaries, employers' treatment, but also customers. Those are

some average salaries. It all depends on the media outlet, editor, editorial policy... Eventually, it all depends on the journalist and their approach to work and the profession.

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> Propaganda reached new levels with introducing social networks. How possible is it to maintain integrity in the times when you easily become a target and when everybody has a space to publish anything, including misinformation?

It is possible, and it is not that difficult when journalists do their jobs. The media are one thing, and social networks another. More and more, this becomes the time of social networks. However, the problem with them is that everyone there is a journalist, a writer, a political analyst... How much of grounds and credibility they have is another story.

Whether in paper format or otherwise, the media will survive. Especially the media insisting on a professional level, fact-checking, putting the information in a correct context. Although it largely seems that this is the time of social networks, certain media outlets will get out of this crisis and continue working. Journalists will continue doing their jobs, just like before. Surely, with some modifications, with adapting to new technologies.

> Have you been in delicate situations when you had to fight to maintain your integrity?

Of course, we have all been in situations like that. From the situations in the newsroom, to the situations with the people we talk to, our sources... There's often a fine line, even when it comes to friendly relations. You must always have the same attitude because what you put your name on, that is yours. There can be no compromise.

The problem is that many journalists start self-censoring in accordance with the expectations of the editorial policy and the editor. There are things that are unacceptable.

Montenegro is a small environment, we know many of those sources from both sides of social layers, and one can simply be friends with someone, and still not trust them. Everything must be checked, and especially not indulge sources, friends...

That is something journalists face on a daily and weekly basis.

There is also the problem of economical nature, which is all-known and talked about a lot lately. So far it was also the problem of not being able to reach information, the closed institutions, delivering information only to certain



Closed institutions are the biggest problem

media outlets, who then publish it without criticizing. There is also the amendment to the Law on Free Access to Information, which is full of holes. Often the journalist didn't get the information they wanted and asked for. Closed institutions are the biggest problem.

> What is the public interest to you?

Everyone should work in the public interest and everyone will swear that they are all about it. In the Code of Ethics, the public interest is defined well - a journalist must be a critical observer of the carriers of social, political, and economical power when reporting on them in the public interest. That is one of the basic principles, and it is defined well, especially in societies like this one where the public interest is to warn and point at the wrongdoing of the government, because it's about mutual resources, our money that was wasted.

We had the same government for 30 years. It's changed now. That public interest will stay the same. Whoever worked in the public interest will continue to do so.

The ones who didn't, and who used the public interest to defend the state, the church, they will maintain their course.

> Are the Montenegrin media working in the public interest?

Some are, others aren't. The biggest problem is that the public interest isn't perceived too well in the heads and practice of many, so until now, for some, it was defending the regime legacy, and for others it was defending the church.

The public should know about everything that the powerful public figures are doing. It should and be the cor-

rective so they would do better, too, so we could correct them into working in the public interest as much as possible and in the interest of the citizens, rather than for themselves, like we did in this election and via various other pressures.

> You are working in a magazine that was on the front line of the profession defense during the war in Yugoslavia. Do you feel like that legacy is valued enough?

At *Monitor* that legacy is nurtured and insisted on. Regarding the society, the way it is now, that legacy wasn't too necessary except on, often artificial, rhetorical level. How valued that legacy is shows the fact that the status of *Monitor* employees as "the enemies of the state" hasn't changed much since the '90s.

> Subjectively, do you feel that, working in the Monitor newsroom every day, you are still on the front line?

It is natural for the journalists to try to always be on the front line, to convey the information and discover what's hidden. Then, there are many who try to keep the journalists from being the very first line of defense and to hide what the public should know. That's the beauty of this profession, which is not appreciated by those who are more into marketing rather than journalism.

> Dragana Peco

Journalist of the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK) and of the international network Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP); recipient of several international and national awards, including the Award for Outstanding Merits in Investigative Journalism given by the South East Europe Media Organization CEI/SEEMO and the award for ethics and courage “Dusan Bogavac“.



> When we say professional integrity, it means that...

Journalists strive to publish the truth;

They should comply with the rules of the profession;

They respect both-sides journalism;

All sides involved in a research should be contacted.

In my case when I work on an international story that involves about 20 foreign companies, it is important to contact them all in order to get the most complete and trustworthy picture;

They should persevere in truth;

They should not work for anyone's interests, but for the interests of the citizens;

Everything should be correct and objective;

Nothing should affect the work of journalists to prevent them from working in this way.

> What are the main reasons for journalists to stop complying with the norms of their profession?

I can't accept that one of the reasons may be a difficult financial situation, because there are other jobs that one can do honorably. Nobody has to work as a journalist for a low and unsatisfactory salary. One can engage in other professions properly with clear conscious and earn the same or a higher salary. I wouldn't be able to do this job and not do it professionally. I wouldn't be able to find excuses in having to pay the mortgage, tuition for the children or in anything else. I would do something else. That is one of the reasons others cite from their experiences, but I can't justify it.

> You are often targeted on social media. How does this influence your work?

Concerning fake news and smearing articles, if you are a journalist with integrity you will defend yourself, surely.

Nothing can damage your reputation if you do your job professionally

Nothing can damage your reputation if you do your job professionally. The only problem is that explaining what is really true takes more time and energy. The readers, who know who we are and what we publish, won't change their minds about us when they see on other sites some fake news about us and our work. It's similar with a dozen of lawsuits filed against us by politicians in power or by other businessmen, with the goal to find out how we dug up certain information and to take away our energy, time and money by engaging us in these proceedings. So, we have to drag ourselves through courts to defend what we have published and verified before publishing, instead of

doing the actual investigative work, which is the reason for our existence. It is hard, because there's more and more of it. You have to swim in that mud and pull through. In the end you will succeed because you know that you are doing your job the way you are supposed to, it's just draining your energy.

> Along with the already mentioned, what are the most common problems that journalists face?

There are a few of them. Lately, it is hard to get the information that is public and should be accessible to the public. I refer to the information about certain affairs and projects of the state that should be published on the public institutions' websites. To date, we haven't seen the contract for the concession of the Belgrade airport. You have to fight for years, file complaints, if you have where to file them, because a state institution can ignore your demand for information of the public interest. In the end, you need to go through the office of the Commissioner For Information of Public Importance And Personal Data Protection, even though the information in question are public.

One of the problems is that you need several months, sometimes even a year to get the information you need. For that, you need a lot of patience, perseverance and persistence.

The problem is that you can become a target in pro-regime tabloids and in the street as well, get physically [attacked]. It happened several times that the tabloids, controlled by the regime, published lies about us with photographs made in the street by the Security Information Agency (BIA). The editor of the KRIK, Stevan

Dojcinović, has sued Informer and they themselves said that they had gotten the photographs from the BIA.

The problem is that you could be physically intercepted in the street, which has recently happened to my colleague Bojana Pavlović. She was approached by unknown individuals who said that they were the police. They took away her mobile phone and asked her to delete the photographs of the President of Serbia's [Aleksandar Vucic, Ed.] son in the company of the people known for their connection to the Kavacki Clan. You may press criminal charges but they may get rejected.

If you want to get a statement from an ordinary institution, if you have a question that can be answered in one phone call in the normal world, here you can't get it.

There are various problems and obstacles, people who want to work as journalists face; in short, from asking questions, not getting any answers and spending months sending demands to institutions for information that should be publicly available, to becoming a target of the pro-regime media, because nobody likes what you have to say, that is because nobody wants the important information to be made public.

> From everything that you have said, working as an investigative journalist is a serious challenge.

Over time, all of this has become a part of the job – being careful about which road to take, about the people you pass by in the street, about who is sitting next to you when you stop by for a coffee, about whether someone is going to break into your offices and take your equipment and material or break into your private apartment and rummage through your things... everything is possible. You live with it.

It's not agreeable, it's stressful and it happens on daily basis, but the fact that it became normal is the most frightening. That is the life of journalists in Serbia, if they do their job professionally.

On the other hand, it's a challenge. I love this job very much. A good thing about Serbia is that this is an inexhaustible field for investigative journalism. Wherever you scratch the surface, you can find something interesting and write an investigative story.

Here's an example. I was walking downtown, and there was a street all dug up for repair. I noticed palettes of pavers for sidewalks waiting to be installed, and there was a label on them. That evening, I checked whose firm it was and found out that one quarter was owned by Zvonko Veselinovic and Milan Radojicic, the rulers from the north of Kosovo, where they are wanted for implication in the assassination of the politician Oliver Ivanovic. I came across this by an accident and wrote a piece of news, but I want to say that you can find it anywhere. Everywhere you look there's corruption and if you dig a little, you will stumble upon deep connections between those in power and certain criminal structures. KRIK has already written at length about it.

A nice thing about this job is that you get to meet a lot of kind, good people and get to certain places you wouldn't be able to reach had you had another occupation.

It would be good if the young people were more encouraged to join this profession. I'm glad that two young women, still students, are doing their internship with us and would like to stay here. That gives me hope that there are people after all. There needn't be many of them, but those who have a feeling for this, who were born to do this, they will do the work nonetheless.

> The case of someone breaking into your apartment remains open. Have you ever wondered whether your work is worth everything you're going through?

I have, when I realized that I'm hurting my health because of the stress and that my work was one of the causes. That is when I thought that I didn't want my work to affect me like that. When I had a break in, it seemed that nothing would be solved. It's been three years since then and the perpetrator remains unknown, but I became stubborn. If their goal was to scare me, to make me leave my job, I told myself: "I won't allow it".

I'm often asked what it feels like when you discover something, publish it and nothing changes. I haven't lost my motivation for work, but I did think about it. When my colleagues advised me to stay abroad for a while, I realized that it was pointless, since I would still keep an eye on what was going on in Serbia.

When I talk to my older colleagues, who have done this job for decades and knowing what it represents, it's not all the same to me. I think about how much I admire them for working for 20, 30 years.

> Do you have enough support?

Yes. I have support in the newsroom, from my editor, colleagues from other newsrooms and from abroad. It means a lot to me.

> What is it like to be a journalist in the country where attacks on journalists and their assassinations remain unpunished?

It's horrible when we consider the number of attacks on men and women journalists. It's obvious that there's no intention to solve any of those crimes, when we take into

account that a few decade long cases still remain open and that trials are turned into a farce before our very eyes. It's awful. We are almost used to threats, after having listened for years about all this, plus what has been happening to us. We know in advance that none of these cases will be solved. You may get a threat on social media and authorities may open a case, since it's their official duty. However, we had situations when after getting death threats on social media and reporting them, nothing happened for years. Even though we did some research by ourselves, using our investigative reporting skills to discover who had threatened us on social media, and giving our findings to the police. Still, nothing happened. It's horrible when something happens and you report it, knowing that nothing will be done to solve it. What's even more tragic is that god knows how many cases there are in Serbia, when our colleagues go through similar situations, but decide not to press charges and stay quiet out of fear. In this line of work, solidarity is extremely important.

> Vesna Rajkovic Nenadic

Journalist in the Beta news agency, editor in TV Atlas and portal Analitika. Currently employed at the Institute for the media of Montenegro.



> How did you fight to maintain your identity look like?

I have worked for various media outlets, of different profiles, both in Serbia and Montenegro. Working as a reporter for foreign media, I was not in a situation to fight for maintaining my personal integrity.

In the media outlets I have worked for, there is always that line that everyone wants to cross in order to jeopardize your integrity. I fought and I hope I managed not to cross that line throughout my honest work. That means that, in every media outlet I worked for, I had to follow the standards and the codes of journalism, and those basic rules of journalism. The first rule of journalism used to be to always have at least two sources and two sides to the story. Today you can hear - what do you need the second side for? You can always write a piece with only one.

I kept trying to maintain my personal integrity by holding on to the basic rules of journalism. And if I would get into a situation that a superior asks a question, I would stick to the rules. Let's look at that piece and see what professional and ethical mistakes I made, and I have no problem correcting them if you convince me I was wrong.

Once I had an extremely intimate and personal decision - there are things you just can't get over, but you can't quit over everything, either. We live off this job, we are in the market. And then I told myself: "OK, if you don't want to sign this, your name will not be in it. Whoever is your superior will sign it." Now, that was my fight for my integrity.

> If we know what the challenges that journalism faces today are, is it possible to maintain integrity in that profession, given the circumstances?

That is becoming increasingly more challenging, especially in the portals which are getting more and more relevant. There's a fine line between social networks and portals. Information is being copied. In printed media, especially in TV and radio journalism, there is much less of that because a piece goes through at least two or three people.

In portals, that's a big problem. Few people are working, they are doing an enormous job and they don't sign the pieces. You don't have to, many renowned journalists there. For most portals, you don't know who works there, what names there are. It is very important to sign your work. People work and write differently when their name is shown than when it is published signed by the "portal" or "newsroom". In such situations, while chasing clicks and visits, which is imposed by the advertisers they live off, it is very difficult to make out the social networks' influence. I find it unacceptable to publish content taken from the social networks without additional checks, even when it comes to official pages. Additional checks require knowledge and require time, and that is something the portals are lacking.

> Integrity in journalism - what does it mean to you?

I think that the integrity in the media is a matter of personality and that it is deeply connected with knowledge and professionalism. What does that actually mean? I believe that a journalist can maintain personal integrity regardless of what kind of media outlets they work in, the pro-regime or pro-opposition ones. How you will work, what your articles will be like, depends on your knowledge as a journalist. That's how I perceive integrity. You can work for the freest media outlet there is, and still have no personal integrity and do only as the owners and editors tell you to.

For me, integrity is personal knowledge and personal professionalism. If you are unsure of your knowledge, from the formalities concerning the craft to thinking things through, education, and personal courage - you have no integrity.

The problem is there is less and less integrity. In Montegrin media, there are mostly people who don't know much, who come fresh out of the university which taught them little, who are obedient, and they are obedient because they lack knowledge, basic education and basic knowledge. They are easily manipulated. That is the key problem with the media and integrity in journalism.

If you have someone who knows very little, and is paid very little, you can't expect them to stand up to the owner or the editor when they write a piece.

> What are the consequences of such approach?

The consequences of all that are the facts - the terribly low salaries in the media and pressures that are not direct but rather sophisticated. Rarely will you find an editor

who will bluntly say you mustn't write that, but they will create such an atmosphere that you will exactly know what you can and cannot do. After some years, you start to think like an editor. That's the key problem. And it is directly connected to knowledge, courage, and what is called integrity in the media. You have journalists who are obedient because they start to think like editors and owners. In time, you start doing what they expect you to do, because you are underpaid, and aware of the environment you work in. Also, because you are aware of the pressures, political ones and nowadays economical because they come from the advertisers, big telecommunication companies and retail chains, who think that they are entitled to edit a media outlet because they paid a €200 ad. And that often happens by threatening to stop advertising and therefore jeopardize the existence of the media outlet.

Loyalty doesn't imply being loyal to the profession, but to the editor, the owner, the economical or political power standing behind the media outlet. The media don't need journalists thinking with their own heads, but with the heads of the owners.

> What are the most common problems in doing the job professionally?

The main problems are the financial factor and insufficient knowledge of the journalists. I think that the best people in journalism are leaving, but nobody is seriously dealing with that. A society cannot function without media. The media market in Montenegro will soon crave a serious media outlet.

> When you say people are leaving the media, what are the consequences?

They are enormous for the society as a whole, not only for the profession. When I was starting this job, over 20 years ago, it was still a respectable profession. As a young journalist, I was paid more than a basic court judge. My work was appreciated. Today, the best ones are leaving, pushed by the weight of the economic crisis and enormous pressures, undefined working hours. And what do you get? Young people who work for low salaries, know very little, who are mostly uneducated and not ready to learn. They are easily manipulated. It is so easy to ask and get whatever the owner wants.

> Where is the solution? Is there one?

Had you asked me that two or three months ago, I would have said there wasn't one. Today I think that there is room for serious journalism. Various propaganda and misinformation dragged us to the rock bottom. I think that a part of them realized that you can't bring democracy into the society with Pink (a sensationalist regional television) and Zadruga (a reality show). I think there is enough awareness because we've reached rock bottom and it can only get better from now on. I also think that the decision makers will realize that, and that the international community will show some interest in all of this.

> What brought back your optimism?

That is a very good and a very difficult question. Let me be precise. I don't think that the new ruling majority will show more understanding for freedom of speech and journalism (author's note: There was a regime change in Montenegro election in June 2020). On the contrary.

Some of the best journalists are not doing this job because there are no media outlets where they can do it honorably



Everything they've done in these 40 days points quite the opposite. But I think that a part of the guild realizes that this is not sustainable. That we must return to honoring the code and basic principles of the profession. Some of the best journalists are not doing

this job because there are no media outlets where they can do it honorably. In Montenegro, you can't find a media outlet where you can read an objective piece of information. Citizens recognize that. They shouldn't be underestimated so much and consider them delighted by *Zadruga* and other *zadrugas* in the media. I also think that the need for decent journalism will grow. The best testimony about the state in the media is every report of the European Commission. I think they are ready to finance various trainings in order to improve the situation.

> Montenegro is one of the rare countries in the region where the creators and broadcasters of fake news. What is your view on that?


I fully agree with the Montenegro's ombudsman's attitude on this matter. I will quote him: "Certain examples in Montenegro have shown that the authorities of the government in terms of controlling the freedom of speech were misunderstood, and I sincerely hope that the courts will limit the powers and actions in some ongoing cases which are at the very least debatable from the point of view of applying the conventional standards."

I would like to add another thing. Here journalists and citizens were arrested under the charges of public disturbance and spreading panic. That is absurd, because

how will you prove that I, for example, was disturbed upon hearing that news. On the other hand, many media outlets and quasi media outlets spread fake news, offend, slander. I believe we are paying the price for the premature decriminalization of slander, that, as a society, we were not ready to take that step. Because now, you are mostly left with the option of a civil proceeding, to sue a media outlet and get a small monetary compensation.

> Nazim Rasidi

Editor at the ALSAT television; head of the NGO Diversity Media Production that focuses on coaching for journalists and media literacy; host of “Programi 200”, a unique political program in North Macedonia, because it is bilingual – in Albanian and Macedonian. He used to work for the BBC.



For me, it was a challenge to unite two audiences in North Macedonia. I use the plural, because there are many, but the most domineering are the Macedonian and Albanian audience. That is why the program is always translated and I work in two languages and sometimes in English.

It was especially challenging to work when the party VMRO-DPMNE was in power, because their goal was to keep the public divided. They knew that the majority of the Albanian population in North Macedonia doesn't vote for them, so it wasn't important for them to have media in that language. On the other hand, the majority of the Macedonian public doesn't speak Albanian, which was ideal for them. However, neither the television station I work for nor I accepted this situation. The reaction on our program has proved them wrong, because the audience joined in because of the good journalism and verified facts and not because of the nationality.

I think that the reaction of the audience has surprised the VMRO-DPMNE. Because of it Nikola Grievski (ex Prime Minister, currently a fugitive, Ed.), came for an interview, which was rare. After several years, he accepted to come

as a guest to a television station that had criticized the work of his government. His goal was to soften some of his attitudes. Today, with the change in government, this relationship is better. They do not give different statements anymore and they do not have different attitudes towards different audiences, based on their language. If we managed to contribute even a little to cohesion of mutual values, we did something positive. It's important for the society in our country, because causes of bad governing shouldn't stay hidden behind a language.

Language is important. For the Albanians it is one of the foundations of their identity, but it is also a communication tool. Sometimes, from the point of view of journalism, we have to emphasize that what is important is the professionalism of our work and not the language.

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However, given the fact that the public is divided by their language and therefore ethnicity, we have prejudices towards what has been published from that aspect. Reports and analysis are often given a certain ethnical weight because of the ethnicity of a journalist and not because of the information he publishes. For instance, nowadays there are no Albanian journalists working for the Macedonian media outlets, let alone Albanian editors or chief editors. That is an additional challenge for me, how to gather the audience together.

> What was it like to work as a journalist during the rule of VMRO-DPMNE?

Journalists in Macedonia showed integrity during the years of the semi-authoritarian regime. At that time, the media were going through different situations and were exposed to great pressures. Certain journalists, as well as the media helped the citizens deal with the regime. It's unquestionable. Some journalists were openly threatened, there were campaigns organized to humiliate them. Whole newsrooms were under pressure. The media that criticized the government got shut down. Editors and owners of the media had been replaced and after, the editorial policy was changed too. Important television stations ceased to make debate programs. The journalism, as a profession, was completely degraded.


> Is the position of journalists better today?

Today, media workers face two situations, two challenges, apart from the pressure that the media outlets they work for will be shut down.


The first one is the culture of lack of transparency of those who are in the governing positions. It has been present for a long time. This needs to be dealt with. Politicians and state institutions need to understand the importance of transparency and responsibility. We faced situations where the state institutions insulted our colleagues and exercised pressure on them using even newspaper headlines.

The other situation is that politicians try to destroy through social networks the credibility of our journalists, by insulting them and writing that the journalists, who express their opinions on certain issues that are unfavorable for those politicians, are corrupt.

This is a new phenomenon and maybe it doesn't have the same effect on journalists as threats they used to get in the



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past, when they were facing another kind of pressure and when they were worried for their lives. But it certainly is a serious burden for democracy. If the credibility of journalists gets destroyed, there will be nothing left in the society for the people to believe in.

> When we are talking about how social networks are used to discredit the journalists that represent a threat for the government, to what extent is it possible to preserve the integrity under such pressures?

For now, few are those who even think about this issue – about ways the credibility of certain journalists is degraded and the role of the social networks in that. I believe that it is the part of our political culture and that the political structures and the media should talk about it and work together on solving this problem.

One should keep in mind that journalists can't defend themselves with anything else except with their work. Those journalists who have earned the respect and credibility with their work only show that a job well done is the perfect defense from everything.

However, when these attacks happen, the outcome is fairly bad – not only for the journalists and media outlets they work for, but for the whole political image and democratic principles. The sooner we understand and recognize this, the sooner the public will become more cautious.

The best defense is to respect the professional code.

> A part from the attacks on social networks, what are the other problems the journalists face in Macedonia?

They face the phantom online media used to attack those with different opinions. Different types of online media started appearing – news sites, Facebook pages nobody knows anything about, portals without a legal notice. Nobody knows who is behind this published content. They are used for targeting, not only journalists, but some politicians as well. By the choice of targets, it is clear whom they are trying to defend in the political context. However, by writing that certain journalists are corrupted and publishing lies, they have managed to call into question the credibility of these journalists. This practice was present during the former government, but as a “tool” it is still used by various political structures, especially before the elections.

Corruption is the biggest problem in our society and their goal was to reduce journalism to a corrupted activity. This is really repulsive, especially for all those journalists who are professional. But, as I have already said, if we set aside the personal aspect, this is bad for the whole picture, for our democracy. This is an illustration of just one problem we face. Instead of uncovering scandals and reporting on current issues, journalists must spend their energy to prove to the public that they are not corrupted and that they do their jobs professionally.

Another thing is the lack of possibility to get the information that should be available to the public. Usually, you have to wait for a long time to get it and when you do it can be incomplete.

These two problems are the most important in Macedonia today. Of course, there have always been pressures and

direct threats when journalists write about certain subjects, which are, so to speak, more delicate.

> Have you ever been in a situation where you had to question the standards of the profession?

I will tell you about a situation I was in a few years ago. It's about phantom portals. They appeared in the pre-election period and criticized me based on my religion, trying to prove that I was a bad journalist, because of it and that I am not professional. We hired some lawyers and after a long time the owner was identified. One individual had registered a huge number of these phantom portals, which were connected, as we later found out, with a certain political party, which wasn't in power at the time. We live in a small country and many years later some people who were close to this political structure told me that the representatives of that party thought that I had supported the other political option.

When I tried to solve this problem using the legal means, I ran into a roadblock, because some of the sites had been registered abroad. If it weren't for the "confession" of an activist, I wouldn't have been able to confirm my findings. However, I wasn't able to initiate legal proceedings against an entity that wasn't registered in North Macedonia, even though it was active on its territory.

There are examples of legal proceedings, but they are against concrete individuals who tell lies and insult others in the media.

Today, when we're doing this interview, we are still facing the situations where if news is not favorable for the politicians, they immediately try to criticize the journalists or belittle them on social networks. They think that being

arrogant is enough to bury the news that makes them look bad.

In that way, they are destroying their own goal and integrity as well, since, as we all know it, if you are a part of the opposition you can become the ruling party and vice versa and later on you will want to have all these information channels, journalists and media on your side. I will repeat, because of that it is very important to work on the political culture and understanding of the basic democratic values.

> Do the Macedonian media work in the public interest?

I believe that they do and that there are media outlets with credibility that treat it seriously. There is a need to work on general education about the importance of the public platforms and the ways in which people get information, mostly because of the fact that the large number of these online platforms is the biggest problem, especially the ones about which we don't have any information. I think that in this context we need to talk about the public interest through traditional (television, radio, newspapers) and online media and find a way to regulate the online zone. I'm not one of those who think that that online media should be controlled or pressured, because the democracy doesn't allow these things. However, in this context people need to know which sites report professionally, in order to avoid the ambiguity about the way certain information is published.

You are in contact with younger colleagues through lectures. Is their attitude towards the profession the same as yours was when you were starting out as a journalist?

> Tufik Softic

He started his career as a journalist in Radio Berane. For five years now, he has been the director of this local public service. From the beginning of his career as a journalist, he has cooperated with the independent media outlets from Montenegro and the rest of the region, and for more than ten years he has worked for the independent daily newspaper Vijesti and independent weekly newspaper Monitor. He has cooperated with the investigative network BIRN.



> How difficult is it to write about corruption at the local level?

Many cases of corruption at the local level that I had the opportunity to investigate were, in fact, a part of a much bigger corruption affair which often went beyond the state and the regional level, all the way to international levels. At the beginning it all seemed a bit less serious, but then turned out to be about extremely dangerous people involved in the affairs. That looks like digging the surface of an iceberg, and then you slowly reach deeper and see the real size, or at the same time, that there is no end to it. The unlucky circumstance in a small community is that you write about people you usually know, you know their families, and you see them around every day. In Montenegro, where all the connections – family, the ones created through godparents, or friendship – are traditionally very strong, it usually ends by you mentioning a name, and the next day you don't know how many people are furious

with you and how many enemies you created. That's the biggest problem with being an investigative journalist in a small community.

> Did the journalists' status change in the local community from the beginning of your career until today? If yes, how?

This depends on your ambitions as a journalist. If that ends in sports and lighter, local topics, you usually won't have any problems. However, if you are involved in the investigative journalism which, as I mentioned, as a rule reaches outside the local level, then nothing has changed. On one hand, you have a lot of enemies. On the other hand, if you do your job professionally and without compromise, people start respecting you and asking for you. So, it all depends on how you position yourself at the start, as a person and as a professional. I chose the harder way from the very beginning, and even though I am working in a small environment, I am working on big stories that reach outside the local frames.

> What situations were the most challenging in your work?

I am the author of the first journalist investigation of Wahhabism in Montenegro, for an independent magazine Polje, and at that moment, it was challenging, but also very dangerous. Collecting data in the field was followed by a set of incidents, one of which was pretty uncomfortable, borderline physical, with a man who didn't want the information published. When we had finished, the editors of Polje were under such pressure not to publish the piece again. It was still published, and everything that was subsequently written in other media outlets about Wahhabism was just copying this investigation.

At the same time, I started following and investigating drug flows in the north of Montenegro, and that turned out to be extremely risky, because it was about two biggest drug cartels in Montenegro, with headquarters in the country's north, where I live. There were crossroads of heroin, which was coming from the east, and cocaine, coming from the other side of the Atlantic. The leaders of the drug cartels were Montenegrin, and they lived in two northern cities. In that area they had whole networks of lower lever associates. Now that was stirring up a hornet's nest.

> Your life was at risk twice for the things you published. Were there any threats before that, and if so, how many?

Yes, yes. Before the attack in 2007, which was qualified as a murder attempt, I received two open threats. All that was happening after that taught me to make a risk assessment before going into any kind of serious investigating. Whom you are investigating, who their connections are, who poses a threat to you. After that, you learn to be as careful as possible and learn the basics of "safety culture", i.e. the elementary measures of self-protection you need to take, and what to watch out for. Before the first attack happened, I didn't think too much about that. Afterward, however, I never let anyone get into the car with me with-



Before the attack in 2007, which was qualified as a murder attempt, I received two open threats. All that was happening after that taught me to make a risk assessment before going into any kind of serious investigating



out first starting it by myself. When that seemed too paranoid, an explosive device was thrown next to my car, only ten minutes after I left it with my daughter and parked it in front of my house. There are many other precautions and safety measures to be taken for your own and your family's safety.

> Have you ever felt protected by the state at any point?

At one point, things were so complicated for me, that after the assessment, I was given security. For three years, I couldn't go anywhere without the escort of two police officers – to work, out for coffee, to the store, for a walk with my family. I could say that I was relaxed during that period, but that is a very difficult life I wouldn't wish to anyone.

> You sued the state of Montenegro for failing to apprehend the people who had tried to kill you. You won that case. How did you decide to take that step?

I was “pressured” into suing the state for ineffective investigation by the director of the NGO Human Rights Action from Podgorica, Tea Gorjanc Prelevic, who was interested in my case. From that moment on, I was no longer on my own and I felt much better.

She managed to find an organization for legal support to journalists from London – Media Legal Defence Initiative (MLDI), in order to finance the lawsuit and the court expenses. I could never have done that by myself. She and my lawyer Dalibor Tomovic gave me hope that we can win the case. Unfortunately, that was a symbolic material satisfaction, so to say, but not justice. Justice should be served when the attempted murder suspects, the ones

who ordered and the ones who committed the crime, get to answer for their deeds.

> How did you feel when it was announced that you won the case?

I was happy for a while. But then the disappointment came when now former minister of justice and director of police, announced that the case from 2007 when I was attacked cannot be solved due to the errors in the investigation and large time gap. We beat the state, but the cases, both of them, remained unsolved to this day and they don't seem to ever get a legal ending.

> Have you contemplated giving up journalism?

I have a degree in journalism and a master's degree in social culture. Journalism is the job I know how to do like no other, and I have no choice but to continue doing it like nothing ever happened, after all. I can't say I haven't thought about leaving journalism, but I had no choice, except to leave the country and start planting flowers somewhere, and I didn't want that.



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> Would you advise the new generations to do this job?

By all means. In a strange way I think that journalism, even with all the risks, is a profession that gives a person the possibility to express themselves and fulfil what's called authentic existence.

> Considering the latest events in Montenegro, i.e. the change in the regime after 30 years long reign of Milo Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists, what is it like to be a journalist in that country today?

What I primarily expect is for an ambience to be created, where the media will work freely, and the journalists, especially investigative journalists, will be able to do their jobs freely and safely. The old government in Montenegro left behind a heavy mortgage of unsolved heaviest cases of attack on journalists, one of which was, as you know, tragic (the assassination of Dusko Jovanovic, the director and editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper Dan, author's note). Can something change there now, I don't know. I don't want to have false hope and fake optimism.

> Aleksandar Vasovic

He worked for Radio Beograd, Radio B92, BIRN - Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, and The Associated Press agency. He currently works for the Reuters agency. He reported from the war zones in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and The Balkan route during the exodus of Syrian and Afghan refugees. He published a book of stories from the war in Ukraine and a geopolitical cookbook.



> Professionally, what situations were the most challenging for you?

The biggest challenge was to present a picture full of graphic, difficult details, so it is correct, but not vulgar. It all comes down to the use of words. One of the examples is the bombing of Surdulica (a small town in the south of Serbia, 1999). How to describe a scene where the rescue team extracts body remains from a completely demolished house? What words to use to maintain the power of that scene, but not make it vulgar? Or, for example, how to talk to the refugees without harming their integrity, while keeping your own, both human and professional, and to show all that in a story you will write that someone will read and understand what you wanted to convey, and to see the bigger picture from all that. I got great help from the editors with that. I learned that exaggerating

with descriptions is wrong, because not everything is “blood and gore”, as the Americans would say.

> You followed wars in your own country and abroad. Were the challenges the same?

When you are a war correspondent in your own country, it affects you directly. You can't expect yourself to be indifferent in such a situation. On the other hand, once you go through that, then every next time is “old news”, but the empathy doesn't go away. We lived here with the war, and that affects you on a million personal levels. You need to find a way to explain to yourself that you will be professional, and that is extremely difficult.

During the '90s we were doing, in my opinion, a very good thing (we weren't doing it intentionally, but it turned out well, I think), which was trying to keep at least daily coverage “dry” to the maximum, and then we would completely turn to illustrations and the bigger picture, in other forms. It was important to completely “cool down” at least one level, so we could have the mental strength to face everything else.

> How did you handle trauma and did the newsrooms help you with that?

We survived the '90s by constantly talking to each other. People were getting bored by us, but it was the way for some of us not to suffer from a serious PTSD. In the agency I currently work for, that is a very serious issue - we have counselling groups and possibilities to seek a therapist.

> How to prepare for the field? Journalists are today often lead by the fact that everything is online and that it is easily handled, which later

shows in misunderstood context and other mistakes.

There are journalists who do their homework, but there are ones who simply don't. It becomes clear in the final product. First, you read all available news from all the sources you can find in the last year or at least six months, you watch all available videos, you talk to your colleagues. It is good to revise or learn the basics of history and culture of the country or the region in question. Talking to the colleagues who have already been there or still live there, is a must, analytics and diplomats, too. It's also good to talk to the people who have traveled or lived there for a while, or still do.


My latest conflict was about Ukraine. It was clear who put in the effort to prepare, to learn about the culture, sport, cuisine. It is not only necessary to know about militias, but also about why some things are happening. On one hand, you have that kind of people, on the other hand, there are those who are clueless - they report on some things correctly, but they miss the point. Finally, there are those who come after they do their homework, but they have a predefined match result.

> Is there a difference in being a journalist today and at the time when you were starting this job?


A lot depends on the editor. The editor shapes a rookie into someone who will have professional strength. It is difficult to create good journalists with editors who don't educate. What we do now is not educating. Education happens every day in the newsroom. It happened to me so many times that someone throws my text away or messes up my tape, lets me try myself and put some effort in first, and then eventually explains everything. That was

effective, however bad it may sound. That way the editor makes you work on yourself. Today, how will the editor of a high-quality, competitive, but under-staffed web portal, have the time to throw away someone's piece into the virtual bin and say: "Write that again!"?

I've noticed something I call the curse of Google - kids are getting less and less curious. They don't read much. Everything is on Google, on a silver plate. I ran into problems that they don't want to investigate, they accept things as they are, make a report, send, and that's it. Few of them see the bigger picture, ask additional questions, think about what they could discover, dig out, pick up, and what the backstory is.



Journalists have started to behave like readers. A modern reader rarely reads more than three hundred words and reads the first three paragraphs. Then the journalists started acting the same



Journalists have started to behave like readers. A modern reader rarely reads more than three hundred words and reads the first three paragraphs. Then the journalists started acting the same. OK, on one hand, that's the law of the market, but then it is your job to insert as much information as you can and ask as many questions as possible. Kids don't do that because no one's pushing them to do it.

> So how much can we talk about professional integrity?

We can, but there isn't much of it because the media are polluted, everywhere. Of course, the number of people doing the job properly is proportionally big.

> What is the reason?

The curse of the internet. Now anyone with a phone and internet access can become a reporter. And primarily negative HR selection - the phenomenon dragged from the socialist times, at least in this part of the world.

> Did the position of a journalists change throughout all these years?

When I started doing this job, a journalist was expected to be a worker in social politics, so we fought not to be that, but journalists, and so on... Now, I think, it's worse than, say, 30 years ago.

> Social networks brought some positive changes, but also spreading propaganda and unverified information. How much of an accomplice are the media?

Many were the victims of the detrimental effect of taking things for granted. For example, somebody recently spread the news that (the convicted '90s war criminal in the Hague, author's note) Ratko Mladic had died. It turned out that it was published by a satirical Italian journalist. Very few media outlets had checked the news first and, within eight seconds, realized that it is false. Those are the things that are very damaging for the profession.

> What are the most common problems of journalism in Serbia?

I will quote a colleague from the '90s: "It's not a problem for me to get an interview with Bill Clinton (former US president, author's note). I get on the waiting list, and I'll eventually get a call. My problem is to get an interview with the local president of Socialists Party of Serbia (the then ruling party, author's note) from Surdulica". A local

journalist is unable to reach the information because of the decades-long efforts to create an environment where the government officials hide from the media. A journalist now has a problem to even get the information which is open data. Finally, there are pressures on journalists from one, the other, or a completely different side, but that is up to the person doing the job - whether they will succumb to the pressure or not.

> Is there a difference between working for Radio B 92 and the media outlets you worked for afterwards?

At B92 we tried to adhere to all the standards and we mostly succeeded. In all the following newsrooms,

professional standards were as high as possible. There are many differences concerning technical equipment, logistics, planning and work safety. Radio B92 wasn't a large system and it suffered from all the subsequent problems. Material accuracy and impartiality, responsibility

What is the public interest?

“If I say that it's sunny outside, and you say it's raining, a journalist's job is to go out and check.”

for what's written, following the ethics and moral - these are the things this job must be founded on, otherwise it becomes pointless.

> How difficult was it to create such a media outlet in times of war, sanctions, pressures?

We created B92 any way we could - in a makeshift manner. It was good while it lasted.

> Apart from the Ukraine reports, you tried another form - short stories, notes about regular people in

the war zone. Does journalism offer enough space to express everything we see and feel in a crisis?

I wrote those other things because I felt the need to explain to my (Facebook) friends how it all looks, without writing a report for the agency. Afterward, those same friends made me publish it as a book. Journalism did change because the world sped up. There is less and less room for details and their interpretation because the public has less and less patience for that.

