

1 Macedonia's transition and the media

If we generally define the transition as a two-phase movement, where the first phase is **moving from** (leaving the old socialist system) and the second phase is **moving towards** (which in the case of Macedonia means the establishment and functioning of adequate civil and democratic institutions and the market economy), then Macedonia and its media scene still remain in the first phase.

Bearing in mind the function and role of the media in society, especially when the modernisation of the particular society is on the agenda, of primary importance is the optimisation of the role of the media, which points to the status of the media and the nature of the relations it has with other parts of society.

The changes in the Macedonian media, as in Macedonia in general, started with the disintegration of Yugoslavia. This dramatic leaving of the old system had a big influence over the start, nature and dynamic of the transition.¹ Macedonia, although it was not a cause of the destructive changes, was influenced by the character of the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

Besides the effects of the disintegration of Yugoslavia by war, and the effect of international relations in the Balkan region and Europe, the nature of the transition in Macedonia was also influenced by other negative elements. Economic obstacles especially limited the dynamic of transition. The war in the former Yugoslavia and the UN sanctions against the present Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) from the middle of 1992 to the beginning of 1996; the Greek embargo against Macedonia from January 1994 to October 1995, and the pressure from Greece over the European Union regarding its policy towards Macedonia; the continuing instability in the region: the riots in neighbouring Albania in 1997; the potential for war in the Serbian province of Kosovo; all these

¹ The process had a continuity that could be followed from the demonstration at Kosovo in 1981 (when the main demand was for the granting of full republic status to the Albanian-populated province of Kosovo in Serbia) and the consequent establishment of Slobodan Milosevic as the leading Serbian politician in 1987.

The Media and Transition in Macedonia

Klime Babunski

IDS Bulletin Vol 29 No 3 1998

have influenced the Macedonian economy to develop (if 'development' is the word) in very inadequate conditions, with closed borders and the status of a high risk region.²

We could consider the new Constitution, adopted in 1991, as the point at which the transition in Macedonia officially began. Article 16 of the Constitution, guaranteeing freedom of expression and forming the basis for the new media system, is most relevant to the topic under discussion here. The article reads:

The freedom of personal conviction, conscience, thought and public expression of thought is guaranteed. The freedom of speech, public address, public information and the establishment of institutions for public information is guaranteed. Free access to information and the freedom of reception and transmission of information are guaranteed. The right of reply via the mass media is guaranteed. The right to a correction in the mass media is guaranteed. The right to protect a source of information in the mass media is guaranteed. Censorship is prohibited. (Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, Article 16, 1991)

From the media viewpoint, the main characteristic at the beginning of the period of change was the so-called media war in the former Yugoslavia, which took place on two parallel fronts: one was within each of the six republics, as a quest to win control of their own national media, and the other was in the media war between the different republics. In this context it is important to stress that the media war circumvented Macedonia! The instrumentalisation of the Macedonian media by the national political elite failed, and the media war and media-inspired terror did not happen there. An important reason for this were the results of the first multi-party elections in 1991, when no one party managed to win a majority in the National Assembly. This party structure often showed inefficiency in parliamentary decision-making, but at the same time it was an effective obstacle to the

formation of a one-party transitional dictatorship, as happened for example in Croatia or Serbia. So the structure of the assembly and government explains why ethnic control over the state-owned media was impossible. This is important, because at that time the takeover of the media by private ownership was only just beginning.

In the period before the first multi-party elections, and also in the following year or two, the centres of political power lost their directive authority over the media. Parallel to the restructuring of the state-party monopoly, the media were freed from a political transmission role and began to publish differing opinions, with which they started the process of establishing a democratic public opinion.

2 Broadcasting

The changes in the media scene in effect began before the new Constitution was adopted. The pluralisation of the media, particularly broadcasting, went beyond all expectation. In a period of three to four years 210 radio and television stations were registered. Of these, 90 were radio stations, 29 television stations and 91 combined radio and television stations (Secretariat for Information 1996). However, because of the lack of adequate laws, registration does not imply a licence for a frequency or a licence to broadcast: the number of stations actually in operation is thus less than 210. Also, in 1994 the government stopped the process of registration of radio and television stations because of interference with frequencies already in use. Nevertheless, the number of those stations which do broadcast is more than 100 – still a large number in view of the population of Macedonia (2 million inhabitants).

The large number of radio and television stations, however, are not all engaged in strengthening public opinion. The majority are music studios with advertising; their schedules containing little or no information or news programming. In the case of television stations the programming is richer because of sports coverage and films. However, a common denominator is the fact that most stations are part of the black market: usually they do not pay

² The problems originating from the international environment constitute only part of the reasons for the slow transition. The other set of reasons are of internal origin and have an objective nature: the structure and

capacity of the Macedonian economy. However, they have a subjective nature too: the lack of knowledge and efficiency of the economic and political elite in establishing the market economy.

copyright fees and pay little attention to the percentage of airtime that could be sold. The new Law for Copyrights was adopted in 1996, while the Law for Broadcasting Activity, adopted in 1997, established the percentage of commercial airtime permitted in relation to an hour of programming, or the percentage permitted in the whole schedule.

The transitional upheavals did not by-pass the state-owned or public-sector radio and television. Soon after the first period of euphoric freedom came the period of stabilisation of political authority. A year or two after the first multi-party elections and especially after the second multi-party elections in 1994, the Macedonian Radio–Television (MRT) came under double pressure: economic and political. Much of the initial enthusiasm was lost. The executive and legislative powers needed almost five years to solve the problem of inefficient collection of licence fees, and the courts tolerated their non-payment. MRT managed to collect barely 50 per cent of licence fees, a situation which pressed it to follow the commercial route of other media: a lot of low-quality programmes from the United States. The political pressure was most transparent in the appointment and changing of the general manager of MRT and the managers of its television and radio units. The relations of cooperation and/or conflict between the parties which formed the parliamentary majority or government were directly reflected in the appointments of the management of MRT.

3 Print media

In the print media the situation is very different. The transition of this part of the media scene has taken place mainly since 1996. The first three or four years were characterised by unsuccessful start-ups of new private-sector daily or weekly newspapers. This lack of success is partly located in the low living standards of citizens and the high costs of publishing a newspaper; but much of the blame can be laid at the door of the Newspaper Publishing House (NPH) Nova Makedonija. Its untouchable monopoly position is based on its structure: it has its own printing house³ and distribution network covering the whole country, differentiating Nova Makedonija from all other newspaper publishers.

Although NPH Nova Makedonija was privatised in 1996, the structural monopoly remains intact: the printing house and distribution network are part of NPH Nova Makedonija and the state is the biggest single shareholder with 30 per cent of its equity. It should be stressed that both before and after the decision on privatisation, the monopoly position of NPH Nova Makedonija has been based on the policy of the government, and the decision of the Agency for Transforming Enterprises with Social Capital, to keep the whole structure of NPH Nova Makedonija unchanged.

It could be said that the real transition in the print media started more or less two years ago with the founding of a new daily, **Dnevnik**, and particularly in 1997 when **Dnevnik** radically reduced its price. This placed positive pressure on the newspaper market; NPH Nova Makedonija had to reduce the prices of its newspapers. As an illustration, the price of the daily **Nova Makedonija** used to be 30 denars (almost DM1). Following the reduction of the price of **Dnevnik** from 20 to 5 denars and of the prices of **Nova Makedonija** and **Večer**, the total price for all three newspapers is now 30 denars (about 55 US cents). The readerships increased above all expectation. In early 1998 the number of copies sold of the three daily newspapers was more than 100,000, which would have been unbelievable only one year earlier.

This growth in the reading public, combined with the occurrence of serious competition, especially between television stations, bringing an improvement in the quality of programmes, leads to the conclusion that the necessary conditions for the provision to the public of a variety of information sources are already present. The near future will show how much and how fast the public will manage to control the government.

There can be no doubt that today, in comparison with five or six years ago, the media scene in Macedonia has a completely new structure. Private capital dominates the print media, while in broadcasting, radio and television stations run complete programme schedules reaching more than 70 per cent of the population. But while pluralisation is

³ Thanks to the Open Society Institute–Macedonia (Soros Foundation), in 1994 the monopoly of **Nova Makedonija** was broken by the installation of a printing

house in Kochani, where many privately-owned newspapers are now printed.

unquestionable, the democratic capacity of the media system remains largely undeveloped, which necessarily limits the possibilities for establishing civil society.

4 Media regulation and the political elite

The lack of regulation and laws providing for the autonomy of the media until 1997, and after that the existence of unsatisfactory laws, are among the main reasons for the situation already described. Six years' experience without a new broadcasting law only made the uncertainty of any investment greater, producing various negative effects. The owners of the stations were pressed to find exceptional ways to secure their capital investments; market-oriented broadcasters needed close connections with the political elite, so they could make a profit only if they were in line with the political interests of the authorities. The nature of this connection is similar to that required for the accumulation of capital in other post-communist countries and matches the practice of the former political *nomenklatura*. The new economic elite consists of almost the same individuals as the political elite. The whole process could be called political commercialisation: the establishment of commercial broadcasters is under the patronage of the political elite.

The pressure over broadcasting outlets increased with the government's decision on the price of frequency concessions and the adoption of the Law for Broadcasting Activity, according to which licences will be given.

The Law for Broadcasting Activity, although written a long time earlier, failed to improve the situation. The National Broadcasting Council, which was established by this law, does not have real independence, nor the right to make its own decisions. The Broadcasting Council only advises the government and the government can take decisions regardless of its advice. This is the case whether the council grants a licence (Article 13) or revokes one (Article 19). At the same time, there is no provision in the law for possible conflicts between the government and the council; so decisions connected with commercial broadcasting stay with the executive power. On the other hand, although statements have been made with the aim of assuring the public that the

council is an autonomous institution, the law has failed to specify its sources of finance: without a clear financial base, the council's autonomy is open to question. In Article 28 it is written that the financial resources for the council's work must be provided from the licence fee, but the amount of these resources is not defined. To complete the paradox, in Article 77 of the same law, where the users and allocations of the money from the licence fee are listed, the amount of money for every user is defined, but the Broadcasting Council is not mentioned.

Many questions have been raised regarding the solutions provided in the law to ensure its observance. It is a further source of concern that the executive branch of government (various ministries and regulatory bodies) can take measures against broadcasters who act in contravention of this law, independently of the Broadcasting Council.

It is therefore clear that, even after the adoption of the new Law for Broadcasting Activity, private, commercial broadcasting in Macedonia has stayed in the shadow of the government. At the same time, neither this, nor the recently adopted Law on Macedonian Radio-Television (MRT), have established public service broadcasting. The members of the Board of Governors of MRT, as well the members of the Broadcasting Council, are not appointed with the two-thirds majority required in the National Assembly. Having in mind the experiences of both post-communist and Western European countries and knowing the domestic political culture, it should not be a surprise if in the nomination of members of MRT's Board of Governors, major attention is paid to their party affiliations. In both laws the two-thirds majority principle is absent, and hence the opportunity has been missed to establish a mechanism that will prevent the interests of the political parties from playing a dominant role in the bodies which have regulatory functions in broadcasting. In fact, none of the media laws has the status of the so-called system laws, which need a two-thirds majority in order to be adopted, like for example the Law for Local Self-government.

As already stated, the role of the media in establishing and promoting civil society is limited by economic factors. The financial input in the media industry is effectively limited by tax law to 3 per

cent of a company's turnover.⁴ Maybe elsewhere such a limitation would not have great importance, but in the circumstances of the Macedonian economy, where a lot of firms went out of business and, at the end of 1996, 40 per cent of the labour force was registered unemployed (UNECE 1997), this 3 per cent limitation has a much greater negative effect. If we add to this the absence of foreign capital, especially in the media, then the limited capacities of the media to protect itself from the pressures of the political elite become clear.

5 Conclusion

The importance of the media for the development of civil society is manifest if we stress the attitudes that the new political and economic elite have towards civil society. Arato (1994) argues that the best for the new professional politicians is a narrow concept of democracy, which reduces the communication channels for groups outside the parties and parliament. On the other hand, the new economic elite behaves similarly: civil society is reduced to the market economy as a protection of property and privatisation, and trade unions or consumer associations are luxuries.

The nature of current relations between the media and its environment indicates, rather than an active role for it in establishing civil society, the impossibility for it of acting as agents for or of civil society. The need for better laws is obvious. Such a regulatory framework should provide a space for media which will produce information according to

professional principles, rather than to the current parliamentary or governmental party majority, or the interests of the small group of enterprises able and willing to spend more than 3 per cent of their income on media space and time.

Of course this is not the end of the story. With an improvement in the situation (better laws and the development of the market economy), Macedonia will return to the old problem: how much the agenda of daily life, as reflected in the media, will cover citizens' needs. New problems will arise, such as access of members of the public and social groups to the media, and public participation in regulation of it. But these matters are part of the second phase, which leads towards civil society.

References

- Arato, A., 1994, 'The rise, decline and reconstruction of the civil society and directions for future research', *The Public*, Vol 1 No 1-2: 45-53
- Republic of Macedonia, 1991, *Constitution*, Skopje
- Schramm, W. and Roberts, D.F (eds), 1972, *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*, Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press
- Secretariat for Information of the Republic of Macedonia, 1996, *Report 1996*, Skopje
- UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), 1997, *Economic Survey of Europe 1996-1997*, New York and Geneva: United Nations

⁴ Each year the government also provides assistance to various newspapers from the budget. The value of this

assistance for 1997 was US\$1.8m.