

# **Fragmented and Polarized: Montenegrin Media Struggle with Self-Regulation**

Calls for a unified self-regulatory body are met with skepticism among experts and practitioners, who point out that the fragmentation mirrors the deep political divide in society

## **Milos Rudovic and Damira Kalac**

On June 10<sup>th</sup> the council of Radio Television of Montenegro (RTCG), the small Balkan country's public service broadcaster, appointed Danijela Popović as its first ombudswoman.

RTCG follows in the footsteps of other media in Montenegro, like the daily newspapers 'Vijesti' and 'Dan', Television Vijesti and the weekly "Monitor", which have institutionalized a similar approach to self-regulation as early as 2013.

Besides the ombudspersons, since 2012 various local and national media outlets are members of the Media Council for Self-Regulation (MSS), a collective self-regulatory organization.

The fact that self-regulation is fragmented into different entities reflects the polarization of the media landscape in Montenegro.

Although experts and stakeholders remain divided on the merits of uniting under one umbrella, they agree that more efforts should be done to raise professional and ethical standards in the media.

"With very few exceptions, there is neither self-regulation nor regulation, so most of the media, especially the news websites, feel free to write whatever they want without any accountability - insulting people, inciting them, spreading hatred of those who think differently," says Mila Radulovic, the president of the Association of Professional Journalists (DPN).

"By looking at it you cannot say whether our goal is to promote freedom of expression or to sow hatred," she added.

## **Mistrust of the MSS**

According to the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders, in 2021 Montenegro ranked 104<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries, the worst performer in the Western Balkans. The report notes that local authorities continue to harass journalists, while infamous cases of physical attacks remain unsolved.

According to the media law in Montenegro, a collective external self-regulatory body can be formed by the media and each media may form an internal self-regulatory body.

Ranko Vujovic, executive secretary of the MSS, believes that uniting under a single regulatory body would help improve the situation in the media in Montenegro and raise the level of professionalism.

“If a large part of the media community would support efforts for more professional and ethical journalism, it would certainly affect all media,” said Vujovic, while adding that a single body would also lead to a more equal application of the code of journalists and its interpretation.

“Status and position of media in the society could be to the large extent improved by common self-regulation,” he added.

However, not everyone agrees that collective action is the way to go, particularly in light of the fraught and polarized media scene in Montenegro.

Paula Petricevic, ombudswoman of the daily newspaper “Vijesti”, of the television station with the same name and the weekly “Monitor”, is of the idea that uniting under one self-regulatory body has no basis in Montenegrin reality.

According to the ombudswoman a single self-regulatory entity would be possible only in ideal real-life conditions, which in her opinion is not the case in Montenegro.

“At the moment and in the circumstances of exacerbated mistrust, harsh polarization of the media landscape, politicization of public broadcaster, instrumentalization and abuse of the media that are established non-transparently and according to daily political needs, I think that the idea of a single self-regulatory body has no basis in reality,” Petricevic said.

The ombudsman of the daily newspaper ‘Dan’, Ilija Jovicevic was even more direct in his rejection of a single self-regulatory body, arguing that it would not lead to “absolutely no improvement in the Montenegrin media landscape.”

“There is no other body that can better and more fully than the Ombudsperson meet the needs and challenges of properly understood self-regulation in modern journalism,” he said.

Mistrust of a single self-regulatory body was exacerbated by the fact that for years the MSS reviewed complaints for articles published in media which were not members of that body. That practice stopped in 2017, when the MSS changed its statute.

The director of the Media Association of South East Europe, Vuk Maras, notes that there is deep mistrust in the media community in Montenegro for the MSS.

“It is extremely biased, with the essential goal of re-educating professional media, and not self-regulation of its own members and their way of reporting”, said Maras, adding that members of the MSS are media outlets close to former Montenegrin authorities.

According to Maras, instead of establishing the preconditions for collective self-regulation, the former government made changes to the media law to manipulate the collective self-regulatory body, which was established as a tool of pro-government media outlets.

“It demonstrates that the goal was to protect the one body that was created as very partial and biased and founded by the media, which in that moment pursued pro-government editorial policy,” he said.

Maras notes that professional media in Montenegro were forced to create their own internal self-regulatory mechanisms.

“It is an additional burden that falls on the shoulders of professional media,” he said.

### **Different procedures, single codex**

Although they adhere to different statutes or rules of procedure, the Media Council for Self-Regulation and media ombudspersons make their decisions obeying the same code - the Codex of Montenegrin Journalists.

The most frequent violations of the Codex relate to complaints for lack of accurate, objective and impartial reporting.

The executive secretary of the MSS, Ranko Vujovic said that when the Media Council reviewed complaints against all media outlets, the submissions reached as high as 40 per year, and dropped to 30 when they decided to restrict the self-regulatory mechanism to members only. However, due to the lack of funds in 2018 and 2019, the Media Council was forced to put a halt to its activities and this was reflected in the number of complaints it received.

“During the last year we received only five complaints,” said Vujovic. “Of those five, the Appeals Commission found violation of the Codex of Journalists in three cases,” he added.

In the last two years the Ombudswoman of the daily Vijesti, Paula Petricevic received over forty complaints, while nine complaints were filed since the beginning of 2021- three have been rejected, while in two cases the decisions have yet to be finalized..

Since 2019, the Ombudsman of daily newspaper ‘Dan’ Ilija Jovicevic, has received a total of 12 complaints, of which three were formally incorrect. He also points out that there were cases of one person filing several complaints.

“In all those cases, after properly receiving statements from the editorial board of “Dan” or journalists, the Ombudsman assessed that there was no violation of the Codex of Montenegrin Journalists,” said Jovicevic.

Mila Radulovic the president of the Association of Professional Journalists (DPN) said that the current media scene in Montenegro reflects the deep divide and political polarization of society.

“It can hardly be worse than this,” she said.

Radulovic notes that journalists have a hard time accepting criticism from self-regulatory bodies; however, professional standards would improve if the institution was truly independent.

“If self-regulation really comes to life and if the media are mentioned more often for violating the Codex, I do believe that things would get better,” she said. “But that requires the objectivity of the self-regulator,” Radulovic added.

However, Petricevic noted that although self-regulation is important, we all should bear in mind that it is not the fundamental condition for media professionalization.

“It represents the system of finishing touch, which leans on the already achieved and accomplished professional and ethical work standards,” she said.

According to Petricevic the first condition for a professional and ethical media is an adequate legal framework and properly educated, trained and coordinated journalists, who work freely and responsibly in the public interest, without obeying orders of particular interests, censorship or self-censorship.

“Then, self-regulation comes as an advanced system of protection and improvement of professional and ethical standards and is effective as much as it is used by readers, on one hand, and journalists, on the other, trust in the fairness and impartiality of the self-regulatory body in the decision-making process,” she concluded.

### **Box: Self-Regulation in the Balkans**

Unlike most countries in the region, the institution of the media ombudsperson plays an important role in Montenegro, in the effort to strengthen the ethical and professional standards of journalism

The Press Council in Belgrade said in a written statement that they do not know of any media that has its own ombudsperson in Serbia, and the same answer came from the Pristina Press Council.

Otherwise, the Council of Media Ethics in Skopje (SEMM) underlined that regardless of recommendations to establish the institution of the ombudsperson in all newsrooms, for now the concept has yet to gain ground.

“As an organization, together with the Association of Journalists, we actively support the idea of introducing self-regulatory mechanisms in newsrooms, which is creating the institution of the ombudsman,” SENM said.

“In our opinion it is the best approach for professionalization of work and respect for ethical standards in media reporting,” it added.

There is also an international Organization of News Ombudsman (ONO), and among its members is a large number of representatives from EU countries, such as Germany, Belgium, Czech Republic. Radio Television Slovenia also has an Ombudsman.

The Media Council for Self-Regulation in Montenegro, as well as all self-regulatory bodies from the countries in the region apart from Albania, are a member of the Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe.

### **The article in local language**

<https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/552317/borba-za-medijsku-samoregulaciju-izmedju-slobode-i-sijanja-mrznje>





in - foto: AFP/Epist

### Samoregulacija na Balkanu

Za nekoliko mjeseci samoprijavljeno, izvedeno i me-  
dijalno ambudorska i nova tužba u Ombudsman  
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Dobro je što se ne bori protiv nekoga, nego protiv sistema - Skopljak

## Poslanikov pas povrijedio dvije osobe

### Postupak protiv Račevića na čekanju godinu dana jer Skupština nije odradila posao

Skupštinski Admitentni odbor, samostalni je za Ra-  
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## Zahtjeve za skidanje imuniteta Ivanoviću, Krapoviću, Kneževiću, Žogoviću, Raičeviću i Popoviću da objasne tužioци

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