

ETHIC COUNCILS IN WESTERN BALKANS: AN INSIDER PERSPECTIVE

Not brilliant, but still here

By Tamara Skrozza

At the time when press councils or media councils were being established in the countries of the Western Balkans, these self-regulatory bodies have been operating throughout Europe for decades. For example, the Norwegian Council, which was a “model” for the Council in Serbia, has existed for more than a hundred years in the moment Serbian council was officially introduced.

Even more importantly, the self-regulatory bodies of the Western Balkans were founded on "hostile soil", in an environment overwhelmed by heated political debates, confrontation with the past, and an unregulated media scene.

With that in mind, it is a real success that today we can deal with the work of self-regulatory bodies at all. During their founding and their work, each of them faced problems that were on the one hand narrowly professional and concerned professional ethics, and on the other hand related to the environment in which they operate.

PATIENCE AND ENTHUSIASM

When it comes to the Press Council of Serbia, in which the author of this story has been working since the beginning - the problems were both financial, and professional-ethical, sometimes even political; such and so much that sometimes it seemed that there would never be a next session again, and that it was time to part. However, the Council somehow survived it all: misunderstandings between the members, all sorts of pressures, lack of money, sometimes even lack of energy to keep on going.

Ten years after the first session of the Complaints Commission, it can be freely said that it was primarily due to the patience and enthusiasm of the members and founders - four representative journalist associations, which overcame their mutual conflicts for the first (and so far, the only) time, and side by side continued to work on a common goal.

Good example of patience and enthusiasm is the Press Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as evidenced by Ljiljana Zurovac, who was the head of this body for 15 years, and today is a consultant for the establishment and development of media self-regulation in Asian countries.

The Council was established in 2000, at the initiative of foreign organizations and with the support of the Association of Journalists from BiH, and no newspaper publishers were involved in the process. For the first four years, the presiding judge was a member of the British Complaints Commission, as no one in BiH or the surrounding countries had experience with media self-regulation: the idea was to transfer European experience to a post-war state, funded by donor organizations. According to Zurovac, the experiment was not successful: it was a closed system, little known in the public and among the media. This Council was dissolved, and

then journalists' associations did something new: they traveled, talked to publishers who eventually united, gave lectures, public appearances, and over time - thanks primarily to the efforts of Ljiljana Zurovac - media self-regulation became part of teaching at the faculties of journalism, and the Council turned to be a great help to colleagues in the region, who at that time were just developing their self-regulatory bodies.

Despite such and similar efforts, all councils - in one form or another - have faced misunderstandings from colleagues, which have rarely or almost never been discussed at international conferences on self-regulation. Unaccustomed to this system, the media and journalists - sometimes to this day - have been reluctant to accept the possibility of anyone "judging" the ethics of their work. Some were bothered by the composition of the council, some by the idea itself, and some by something else - in a number of cases they were very aggravated by our ruling and started perceiving us as "enemies".

In that sense, the example of Montenegro is especially interesting. As the executive secretary Ranko Vujović testifies, at the beginning of the work of the local self-regulatory body, a decision was made to accept complaints about the work of all Montenegrin media, regardless of whether they are members of the Council. This "especially irritated" the daily newspapers Dan and Vijesti, which are not members. Original decision was therefore changed, and from that moment only complaints about the work of members are considered. Thus, the two most read and most influential papers in Montenegro remained outside self-regulation.

There are also those in Serbia who do not formally or substantially recognize the Press Council - unfortunately, these are tabloids that are among the champions in violating the Journalists' Code. The Council nevertheless receives complaints concerning these papers, although they have no obligation to publish what has been decided. When they mention the Council or its members, the tabloids use insults, but they are not the only ones: even professional media felt offended after some rulings and started campaigning against the Council and, in one specific case a few years ago, even against individual members of the Council.

FINANCIAL DRAMA

Other councils are no exception. According to the executive director of the Macedonian Council, Marina Tuneva, at the very beginning, the problem was that the media did not fully accept the principle of self-regulation and therefore refused to participate in the process. Over time, that has changed, but the problem of financial sustainability remains, as the media still do not pay membership fees, as they do not pay in any other country in the Western Balkans. Most of the media in the region lack money to pay anything, but it seems that the main reason is not the money, but general attitude towards the self regulation as something that is not "ours", that don't belong to us.

Therefore, councils in the region survive thanks to international donor organizations: in a series of mini-interviews with representatives of these bodies in the Western Balkans, they all highlight

the problem of funding as fundamental. "The biggest obstacle in our work is that the organization is not self-sustaining and that we are constantly looking for money," explains Tuneva, and her colleagues from Kosovo, Montenegro, Albania and BiH say similarly.

Someone uninformed would say that donor dependence is not the worst thing that can happen to you. On the contrary. They would say that it is even better than waiting for someone to pay the membership fee. However, personal experience shows that things are completely different: waiting for donors, the Press Council of Serbia, was repeatedly in a kind of de facto bankruptcy, when employees barely received a salary for six months. and members of the Commission worked without fees. It happened that at public appearances we had to alert the public, so that things would move from the deadlock, to get some kind of "project", and thus money. Also, during its entire existence, the Council often had to go beyond the narrowest framework of its activities in order to survive: to organize lectures, tribunes, which in itself is not bad, but it should not be a way of survival.

The most radical example of this problem comes from Montenegro, where the council did not work at all in 2018 and 2019 due to lack of money.

FINALY, THE CASES

Unfortunately, when it comes to media self-regulation in the Western Balkans, the basic thing is rarely talked about: the type of complaints we receive and the public reaction to our rulings.

For example, Ljiljana Zurovac recalls that some decisions in BiH were discussed for hours - in cases of complaints against investigative media covering corruption, articles on the LGBT population, problematic titles and subheadings, etc.

The Albanian Council attracted special attention with a debate on the allegedly sexist photo of an MP, while in Macedonia the most prominent were cases in which high-ranking politicians appeared, cases of hate speech and cases in which the media complained about other media.

Mutual complaints of the media are a common case in the Press Council of Serbia - where the media complain about the theft of content and copyright infringement, but also about mutual slander and disagreement.

The situation in which a daily newspaper published a photo of a dead child on the front page, given to them by their family, has attracted the most attention so far. Since the media previously published that the boy drowned in a pond, the idea was to prove with a photograph that the child was beaten (he was lying in bruises on the coffin). However, the Council decided that this was a violation of the victim's right to privacy and dignity.

This case is still analyzed at colleges and seminars. When we presented it to our colleagues from Western European councils, their position was unique - that the complaint should not have been accepted, because the publication of the photo was approved by the parents themselves.

Whatever and whatever attitude anyone had, the fact is that this case opened the door to serious debates concerning professional standards.

This story intentionally does not mention something that must be pointed out in all reports on the work of this or that council: the number of complaints. If we do a "group" review of activities, like this one, the number of complaints is an incomparable category - it depends on the number of media, but also on the rules on possible complainants: in some councils, a complaint can be filed by anyone, and in others only by a person / group / institution. affected. Therefore, it is pointless to compare them. The most important fact is that the number of complaints in all the councils is either constant, or keeps rising.

It is also meaningless to compare or equate complaints: one significant, long-term influential complaint has more "weight" than dozens of ordinary ones.

In addition, there is a huge imbalance between the number of complaints and the real state of affairs "on the ground". Five years ago, Serbian Council started conducting a regular six-month editing of all national print media in Serbia. On a monthly basis, the number of certain, not questionable violations of the Code is around 700, while at the same time, there is a maximum of ten to twenty complaints to the Press Council per month.

With all that in mind, counting complaints seems completely pointless. What is not meaningless, however, is the fact that - despite numerous problems - none of the Western Balkan councils has been shut down, that each has mobilized the energy and commitment of its members and left visible traces in the media culture of the country in which it operates.

The decisions of the councils are listened to in one way or another, they attract the attention of the public, provoke reactions. On the other hand, it is obvious that thanks to the councils we have new generations of journalists: ones who understand and accept self-regulation as an integral part of their profession. In Serbia, there are more and more students who write seminar and diploma theses on media ethics, and this subject has been approached very seriously at the faculties in recent years.

However, at the same time councils face a number of challenges, most notably those related to funding. Without financial independence and the feeling of the media that self-regulation exists because of them and for them, it is difficult to expect not a light, but any future.

After all, it is still difficult to explain to donors why the Western Balkans is so "different" and why they need to pay for something that in other parts of the world is mostly paid for by the media themselves. In addition, it is necessary for colleagues to accept the decisions of the councils as well-intentioned and not only to formally publish them, but also to accept them in essence.

For now, it seems that both of those "battles" will be difficult.

But we are already used to that.

Antrfile:

OUR GREATEST SUCCESS

When it comes to personal perception of success, representatives of different councils have different views. In the case of the Press Council of Serbia, the personal experience is that our greatest success is the fact that media ethics has become a topic, that it is discussed publicly and that the media - each in their own way - pay attention to it. There are also several decisions that were analyzed at faculties and professional papers, thus entering the history of the media in Serbia. Finally, the Council is the only body in which the two most representative journalist associations work together, although so far they have not found a common language in any other segment of their work.

NORA BELULLI, COMPLAINTS OFFICER, PRESS COUNCIL OF KOSOVO

Proper functioning of PCK as an independent body is considered achievement\success itself. Moreover, the Press Council of Kosovo as an independent organization - all inclusive, which hosts members of all ethnic communities living in Kosovo. I think that this is an additional achievement\success of PCK.

MARINA TUNEVA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, COUNCIL OF MEDIA ETHICS OF NORTHERN MACEDONIA

I could list the following:

- the fact that our Council of Media Ethics is increasingly recognized as a media self-regulatory body, an indicator of which is the frequent use of the complaints mechanism
- our visibility and active networking with different actors in the society (such as with high education institutions, CSOs, professional media organizations etc)
- the establishment of the Registry of Professional Online Media
- the establishment of the Network against Hate Speech in the Media

RANKO VUJOVIC, EXECUTIVE SECRETARY, MEDIA SELF REGULATORY COUNCIL OF MONTENEGRO

Our biggest success is the fact we survived all these years, with no support or understanding of international community, and with constant obstruction within Montenegro.

LJILJANA ZUROVAC, FORMER DIRECTOR, PRESS COUNCIL OF BOSNIA AND HERCEGOVINA

The greatest success of the Council I led is definitely the generations of young journalists, now editors, who have entered the profession with full knowledge and awareness of media ethics, responsibility and self-regulation, and who now apply this knowledge in their regular journalistic work. I am in contact with many of them, collegial and friendly, and I am really proud of their work.

Also, there is the fact that the Council has established itself as a publicly accepted institution, which is at the service of citizens in their search for the truth in media reporting. How that Council will develop further, is up to the new management.

KOLORETO CUKALI, PRESIDENT OF ALBANIA MEDIA COUNCIL

The biggest achievement is the creation of the Alliance for Ethical Media, the first ever self-regulation mechanism in Albania. This Alliance was founded by 16 media members, and it chooses a Board which reviews the complaints. It is operated by Albanian Media Council.

The article in local language

<https://fonet.rs/drustvo/35988560/jos-smo-tu.html>

<https://www.cenzolovka.rs/etika/saveti-za-stampu-na-zapadnom-balkanu-nije-sjajno-ali-jos-smo-tu/>



SAVETI ZA ŠTAMPU NA ZAPADNOM BALKANU: IZ INSAJDESKOG UGLA

Još smo tu

28. 06. 2021. 14:05 | Članica Komisije za žalbe Saveta za štampu Srbije | Tamara Skrozza

BEOGRAD - U trenutku kada su u zemljama Zapadnog Balkana osnivani saveti, vijeća za štampu ili medijski saveti, širom Evrope ova su samoregulatorna tela radila već desetinama godina. Primera radi, norveški savet, na osnovu čijih je iskustava „krojen“ Savet za štampu u Srbiji, postojao je više od sto godina. Mnogo važnije od toga, samoregulatorna tela Zapadnog Balkana osnivana su na „neprijateljskom tlu“, u okruženju preopterećenom burnim političkim debatama, suočavanjem s prošlošću, neuređenom medijskom scenom.

Ako se to ima u vidu, pravi je uspeh što danas uopšte možemo da se bavimo radom samoregulatornih tela. Tokom svog osnivanja i(li) svog rada, svako od njih suočavalo se s problemima koji su s jedne strane bili usko stručni i ticali se profesionalne etike, a s druge povezani s okruženjem u kojem deluju.

STRPLJENJE I ENTUZIJAZAM

Kada je u pitanju Savet za štampu Srbije, u kojem od početka radi autorka ove priče - problemi su bili i finansijski, i stručno-etički, ponekad čak politički; takvi i toliki da je ponekad izgledalo da iduće sednice više nikada neće biti i da je vreme da se razilazimo. Međutim, Savet je sve to nekako preživio: i međusobne sukobe članova, i pritiske, i besparicu, ponekad i nedostatak volje da se nastavi dalje.

