



# **BETWEEN CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS**

A Guide to Media Integrity  
in North Macedonia

Author: Marina Tuneva, PhD







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## **BETWEEN CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS**

**A GUIDE TO MEDIA INTEGRITY IN NORTH MACEDONIA**

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# Introduction

The media sector in the Republic of North Macedonia continues to face challenges related to the digital transition and the changing political environment. These developments critically affect media integrity, defined by the South East European Media Observatory<sup>1</sup> as the interweaving of the influence of policies, structures and practices that enable the media to effectively serve the public interest and support democratic principles.

Several aspects form an integral part of media integrity, particularly including:

- ▶ Commitment to unbiased reporting and avoidance of influence from power centres;
- ▶ Transparency in operations and interests, including clear disclosure of exposure or dependence on specific private or government interests;
- ▶ Compliance with ethical and professional standards.

<sup>1</sup> Petkovic, B., 2014. Media Integrity Matters - Reclaiming Public Service Values in Media and Journalism. Peace Institute Ljubljana. Available at: <https://seenpm.org/media-integrity-matters-book-of-the-see-media-observatory/>. Accessed 11.10.2023.

Accountability and openness towards citizens.<sup>2</sup> For the preparation of this Guide, a thorough and methodologically sound research was conducted, focusing on the key aspects of media integrity in North Macedonia. In addition to analysing the perspectives and views of key stakeholders, various reports and documents were also examined in order to determine the state of affairs surrounding various aspects of media integrity. The aim of this approach was, first, to identify and understand the dominant influences on media practices, and then to derive relevant and effective recommendations for strengthening media integrity in the country.

The significance of this document lies in its potential to serve as a resource for policymakers, media professionals and the general public, providing insights into the necessary strategic steps for nurturing a media environment that promotes integrity and democratic values. Considering the changing nature of the media landscape, this document

has been designed in a way that allows it to be accordingly amended and modified, in line with future research in this area.

The need to build trust in the media is also emphasized in the European Commission's Country Progress Report for 2022<sup>3</sup>, which indicates the necessity of improving journalistic standards and media transparency. The 2023 Report highlights the need for greater transparency in relation to media advertising by state institutions and political parties.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> European Union, 2022. North Macedonia Report 2022. Available at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/48ba61f0-41ae-4cff-9517-29fac190f4bd\\_en?filename=North%20Macedonia%20Report%202022.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/48ba61f0-41ae-4cff-9517-29fac190f4bd_en?filename=North%20Macedonia%20Report%202022.pdf). Accessed 18.10.2023

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, 2023. North Macedonia 2023 Report. Available at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD\\_2023\\_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf). Accessed 04.11.2023.



# Methodology

To produce this document, qualitative research methodology was used, which includes in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion. In the period from October to November 2023, a total of 27 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, including representatives of media and journalism organizations and associations, media experts, representatives of civil society organizations working on the affirmation of human rights, and regulatory bodies. The participants were selected based on their involvement and knowledge of the media sector in the country.

In addition, a focus group was held with local coordinators of the Association of Journalists representing different regions in the country, to gather a more diverse range of insights.

This process also included a secondary analysis of existing documents and reports, carefully selected in terms of their relevance to media integrity. The aim was to supplement the primary data with broader perspectives on the situation and challenges surrounding media integrity in the country.

Based on the set objective of assessing media integrity, the research questions were formulated as follows:

- ▶ How free are the media from external influences, including pressure from political and business power centres?
- ▶ What are the perceived challenges and limitations in maintaining media integrity?
- ▶ What is the role of media in the country in the fight against corruption and how effectively are these efforts integrated in their operational practices?
- ▶ In the context of the growing influence of online media, what changes in the media landscape of North Macedonia are required to protect media integrity?

THIS APPROACH AIMS TO HIGHLIGHT  
THE CRITICAL AREAS FOR ACTION IN  
BUILDING AND MAINTAINING MEDIA  
INTEGRITY IN THE COUNTRY.



## Media integrity: impacts and challenges

This section delves into the key challenges surrounding media integrity, as a result of a comprehensive analysis of various relevant documents and reports. Among others, these include the European Commission's Country Progress Reports, recommendations of the Council of Europe, assessments by Freedom House, and reports of Reporters Without Borders. The insights from this analysis provide a fundamental

understanding of the systemic and structural challenges facing the media sector. The findings will be supplemented and contextualized with the subsequent analysis of the interview results, which will allow a more detailed understanding of the challenges related to media integrity and their implications in the reality of media operation.

## The interests of politics and business influence media integrity

In 2022, North Macedonia embarked on a crucial reform in its media sector, aimed at aligning with the EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive and broader EU and Council of Europe standards. However, despite notable improvements in media freedom since 2017, the sector remains heavily influenced by politics and business, which affects its independence and freedom of expression.<sup>5</sup>

The Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) 2023<sup>6</sup> highlights the urgent need to dismantle clientelism that hinders media's independence. In addition, the MPM directs attention to the key role of anti-corruption measures,

advocating for investigation of the relationship between political entities and media ownership. This relationship is crucial in understanding the media's capacity to independently serve the public interest. A study of the Metamorphosis Foundation<sup>7</sup> reveals a worrying trend according to which the nexus between politics and the media significantly contributes to the spread of misinformation, overshadowing the media's role as a guardian of the public interest. Media with similar ideological and political orientation publish information and disinformation in a coordinated manner, and this practice further complicates the fight against disinformation and emphasizes the problems in maintaining a balanced public discourse.<sup>8</sup>

5 Freedom House, 2023. North Macedonia: Nations in Transit 2023. [online] Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-macedonia/nations-transit/2023>. Accessed 17.10.2023.

6 Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2023. Media Pluralism Monitor 2023. European University Institute. Available at: <https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor-2023/>. Accessed 01.11.2023

7 Stojanovski, F. (ed.) 2022. Research: The Effects of Disinformation and Foreign Influences on the Democratic Processes in North Macedonia. Skopje: Metamorphosis Foundation. Available at: <https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/themes/metamorphosis/download.php?id=34783>. Accessed 14.10.2023

8 Nehring, C. (ed.) 2023. Blurring the Truth: Disinformation in South East Europe. [online] Available at: <https://>

## Risks related to state and political advertising

The influence of state and political advertising on the media sector in the country has been in the focus of an extensive public debate and analysis. While the overall media freedom has seen improvements, the influence of political and business interests continues to be present, often blurring the lines between independent journalism and the agendas of power centres. The expert community and civil society sector consistently emphasize the need for establishing strict and clear rules for political advertising in legislation, particularly in relation to state advertising, as it seriously compromises the independent position of the media.<sup>9</sup>

[www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/E-book+Blurring+the+Truth.pdf/fd6abbb3-f49e-115b-090e-7c9f3a20dfc6?version=1.2&t=1680504776349](https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/E-book+Blurring+the+Truth.pdf/fd6abbb3-f49e-115b-090e-7c9f3a20dfc6?version=1.2&t=1680504776349). Accessed 02.11.2023

9 S. Trpevska & I. Micevski, Media Sector Hotspots in North Macedonia: Decisive Reforms Long Overdue, ASPEN Institute Germany, December 2021, p.32. Available at: [https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/2021\\_Aspen-Germany\\_Media-Freedom-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf](https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/2021_Aspen-Germany_Media-Freedom-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf)

The reforms of 2017, aimed at abolishing state advertising in the media, marked a significant shift in media policy. The decision to abolish this type of advertising<sup>10</sup> was made shortly after the new political leadership came to power in 2017. In the past, state advertising was considered to be one of the most powerful tools used to control the media. In this way, the government would buy the favour of the media, which were used as platforms for aggressive placement of its political propaganda.<sup>11</sup> Substantial funds were allocated for continuous campaigns on various social and political issues.

However, despite the abolition of state advertising, in accordance with the additional amendments to the Electoral Code adopted in 2018, political parties

<sup>10</sup> The information is available on the web-site of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia. <https://vlada.mk/node/13272>

<sup>11</sup> Nastoski, Z. 2023. State advertising in the media brings direct and irreparable damage (Државните реклами во медиумите носат директна и непоправлива штета). Samoprasaj. mk. Available at: <https://samoprasaj.mk/naacik/drzavnite-reklami-vo-mediumite-nosat-direktna-i-nepopravлива-steta/>. Accessed 24.11.202.

have introduced a different mechanism that makes private media dependent on the centres of political power.<sup>12</sup> In accordance with Article 76e of the Electoral Code<sup>13</sup>, during an election campaign, the advertising of political parties in the media is covered by funds from the state budget.

A few years after the abolition of state advertising, another twist occurred. The current Government proposed reintroducing state advertising, that is, amending Article 102 of the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services. The Macedonian Media Association of National Terrestrial Televisions (MMA) considered this Government initiative completely

justified.<sup>14</sup> This major policy change was also justified by the Ministry of Information Society and Administration (MIOA), which considered that it provided a vital economic lifeline for struggling media in times of uncertainty.<sup>15</sup>

However, this move was met with strong condemnation from journalist and media associations, as well as from the expert community.<sup>16</sup> In this way, according to them, the private media are turned into party-ideological institutions, which ultimately defend the commercial interest of their owners at the expense of the

<sup>12</sup> Trpevska, S. and Micevski, I., 2021. Media Sector Hotspots in North Macedonia: Decisive Reforms Long Overdue. In: Aspen Institute Germany. December 2021, p.32. Available at: [https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/2021\\_Aspen-Germany\\_Media-Freedom-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf](https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/2021_Aspen-Germany_Media-Freedom-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf) Accessed 21.10.2023.

<sup>13</sup> The Law is available at: [https://dzt.mk/sites/default/files/2021-10/Izboren\\_zakonik\\_precisten\\_tekst\\_0.pdf](https://dzt.mk/sites/default/files/2021-10/Izboren_zakonik_precisten_tekst_0.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Atanasov, A., 2021. MMA: The government should prepare a proposal for amendments to Article 102 of the Law on Media and submit it to the Assembly (MMA: Владата да подготви предлог измена на членот 102 од Законот за медиуми и да го достави до Собранието). Media Information Agency. <http://bit.ly/4leidhE>

<sup>15</sup> International Press Institute, 2023. Policy Paper: Support for Public Interest Journalism in North Macedonia. Available at: <https://ipi.media/policy-paper-support-for-public-interest-journalism-in-north-macedonia/>. Accessed 15.10.2023

<sup>16</sup> AJM, together with SSNM, CMEM, MDC, MIM, ICS and RESIS, warned that the reintroduction of state advertising in the media could influence editorial policy, as it was the case in the past.

public interest.<sup>17</sup> Taking into account the risk of compromising editorial independence, journalist and media associations offered another solution, that is, to use state funds to strengthen media pluralism and improve the quality of journalism. ***“Our position is that state money can be used for the media, however, for quality media products, or for a fund for supporting media pluralism, which will raise the quality of journalism and the media as a whole. This is not the case with the proposed law”***.<sup>18</sup>

Regarding the need to address concerns about state political advertising in accordance with European best practices, the principles outlined in the

European Media Freedom Act are particularly relevant.<sup>19</sup> It highlights the critical need for using transparent and unbiased criteria for allocation of funds to the media in line with European standards. It should be mentioned that the same is also contained in the so-called Urgent reform priorities of the Reinhard Priebe Expert Group<sup>20</sup> agreed in 2015. The National Strategy for Prevention of Corruption, which lists the priority problems that generate a high risk of corruption, indicates that in order to improve the situation in the media sphere and prevent abuses for political purposes, it is necessary to introduce strengthened supervision and abolish paid political advertising of parties in election cycles.<sup>21</sup>

17 Trpevska, S. and Micevski, I., 2021. Media Sector Hotspots in North Macedonia: Decisive Reforms Long Overdue. In: Aspen Institute Germany. December 2021, p.32. Available at [https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/2021\\_Aspen-Germany\\_Media-Freedom-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf](https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/2021_Aspen-Germany_Media-Freedom-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf). Accessed 21.10.2023.

18 Stojancova, P., 2023. United parties restore government ads (Сложни партии владини реклами враќаат). Radio Free Europe, November 2023. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/slozhni-partii-vladini-reklami-vrakjaat/32687388.html>. Accessed 08.10.2023.

19 European Parliament, 2023. European Media Freedom Act. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0336\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0336_EN.pdf). Accessed 02.11.2023.

20 European Commission, 2015. Urgent Reform Priorities for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/urgent\\_reform\\_priorities\\_mk.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/urgent_reform_priorities_mk.pdf). Accessed 18.11.2023

21 State Commission for Prevention of Corruption. National Strategy of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption.

The Association of Online Media (Onlinemedia.mk) also reacted to the proposed legal amendments regarding state advertising. According to the Association, these amendments offer selective financial support to traditional media, which is considered unfair to internet media. The Association believes that any allocation of public funds to the media should be rational, inclusive, non-discriminatory, sustainable, and primarily aimed at supporting journalists and media workers, rather than media owners.<sup>22</sup>

However, in contrast to the debate surrounding state advertising in broadcast media, the Government has a different approach towards print media. To address the financial pressure

caused by the ban on advertising, a programme for subsidising newspaper printing costs was introduced in 2018. This initiative, as distinct from state advertising and common in many countries, represents a form of state support that resulted from lobbying by the print media industry. The Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) in its 2022 report describes the risk of this type of funding as minimal in terms of potential interference in editorial policy.<sup>23</sup>

As of the date of finalization of this report, the legislation has not been amended, however, a draft law that would remove the ban on state advertising in private media is in parliamentary procedure. The focus of current discussions remains on the question of how to strike a balance between providing necessary support for the media and preserving their independence from political influence.

Available at: <https://dksk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Nacionalna-strategija-DKSK-KONECNA.pdf>. Accessed 14.11.2023.

22 AION, 2023. Online Media Association: The restriction on electoral funding of internet portals should be lifted (Да се укине ограничувањето за изборно финансирање на интернет порталите). 9 November 2023. Available at: <https://aion.mk/macedonia/zdruzenie-onlajnmedia-da-se-ukine-ogranichuvaneto-za-izbornofinansiranje-na-internet-portalite/>. Accessed 17.11.2023.

23 Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2023. Media Pluralism Monitor 2023 European University Institute. Available at: <https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor-2023/>. Accessed 01.11.2023



## A proposal for greater sustainability of the media sector: a media development fund

The establishment of a media development fund has been a topic of discussion in the country for a long time, especially among the key journalist associations. This proposal is considered as a mechanism for encouraging diverse, high-quality journalism that serves the public interest. The fund's system envisages a model in which various media sectors, including non-profit, private, broadcast, print, and online media, can apply for financial support for journalistic projects. The aim is to strengthen the industry and at the same time ensure that the produced content will be of public interest and beneficial to the entire society, including minority communities.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> International Press Institute, 2023. Policy Paper: Support for Public Interest Journalism in North Macedonia. Available at: <https://ipi.media/policy-paper-support-for-public-interest-journalism-in-north-macedonia/>. Accessed 15.10.2023

The public policy document prepared by the International Press Institute (IPI), as part of the report published following the international mission for assessment of the state of media freedom in North Macedonia<sup>25</sup>, recommends solutions that support the economic development of the media, while giving priority to public interest journalism. These recommendations call for establishing a media pluralism fund that would be coordinated by an independent body. This body, composed of relevant media experts, including stakeholders from media associations, non-governmental organizations, academia and cultural organizations, would evaluate project applications and decide on the allocation of project funds.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Association of Journalists of Macedonia, 2023. Fact-finding PFM Report. Available at: <https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/EN-Fact-Finding-PFM-Report-251023-web.pdf>. Accessed 18.11.2023.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



The Resolution 1636 (2008)<sup>27</sup> of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, calls on the states to take steps to encourage media pluralism, emphasizing that fair and neutral state subsidies for the media are necessary for media freedom in a democracy. Recommendation No. R (99)1 of the Committee of Ministers also encourages the states to consider the possibility of introducing direct or indirect financial support schemes for

both print and broadcast media, in particular at the regional and local level, as well as consider the possibility of subsidies for media entities printing or broadcasting in a minority language.<sup>28</sup>

There is also ongoing discussion about the need for stable funding of the public broadcasting service. The EU Progress Report also emphasizes the critical need for consistent and adequate funding of the public broadcasting service, recognizing

<sup>27</sup> Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2008. Resolution 1636 (2008). Available at: <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/xref/xref-xml2html-en.asp?fileid=17684&lang=en>

<sup>28</sup> Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, 1999. Recommendation No. R (99) 1 on Measures to Promote Media Pluralism. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/16804fa377>. Accessed 01.11.2023.

it as a cornerstone of media sustainability and integrity in the country. Despite the 2021 Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, in 2022, the authorities once again used discretionary powers granted by law to cut funding to the public broadcasting sector. According to the EC Report<sup>29</sup>, budgetary fluctuations create uncertainty in planning. The authorities need to provide sufficient and stable funding for the public broadcasting service.

At the same time, the importance of supporting community media as an alternative option to local pluralistic democracy is emphasized. Experiences from other countries show that community media contribute to greater diversity of the entire media landscape, as well as to the encouragement of active citizenship and pluralistic democracy, especially at the

29 European Commission, 2023. North Macedonia 2023 Report. Available at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD\\_2023\\_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf). Accessed 04.11.2023.

local level.<sup>30</sup> These media are not recognized in policies and legislation, therefore they have neither systemic nor financial support from the state. The recommendations of the Council of Europe<sup>31</sup> and UNESCO<sup>32</sup> also point out the need for providing support to this type of media.

30 RESIS, 2023. Community Media - An Alternative Option to Local Pluralistic Democracy (Медиумите на заедницата – алтернативен поттик на локалната плуралистичка демократија). Available at: [https://resis.mk/images/about-us/PDF/001com\\_media\\_policy\\_brief.pdf](https://resis.mk/images/about-us/PDF/001com_media_policy_brief.pdf). Accessed 12.11.2023

31 Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, 2018. Recommendation CM/Rec (2018)1 on Media Pluralism and Transparency of Media Ownership. Available at: [https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/committee-of-ministers-adopted-texts/-/asset\\_publisher/aDXmrol0wvsU/content/recommendation-cm-rec-2018-1-1-of-the-committee-of-ministers-to-member-states-on-media-pluralism-and-transparency-of-media-ownership](https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/committee-of-ministers-adopted-texts/-/asset_publisher/aDXmrol0wvsU/content/recommendation-cm-rec-2018-1-1-of-the-committee-of-ministers-to-member-states-on-media-pluralism-and-transparency-of-media-ownership). Accessed 01.12.2023

32 UNESCO, 2017. Providing Public Funding for Community Broadcasting. Community Media Sustainability Policy Series, 5. Available at: [https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco\\_cmedia\\_sustainability\\_policy\\_5\\_public\\_funding.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco_cmedia_sustainability_policy_5_public_funding.pdf). Accessed 11.11.2023

## Socio-economic barriers undermine media integrity in North Macedonia

The socio-economic status of journalists in the country directly affects media integrity. In June 2023, the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) organized an international fact-finding mission<sup>33</sup> to investigate current challenges in the media sector. The findings indicate that many journalists face poor working conditions, not only in terms of inadequate salaries and uncertain employment status but also in terms of compliance with their labour rights.<sup>34</sup> Poor working conditions, characterized by low salaries and job insecurity, not only affect the status of

journalists, but also their ability to work independently and freely. Among the systemic challenges that need to be addressed, the EC Report highlights the working conditions of media workers, especially their labour and social rights.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, according to this year's World Press Freedom Index<sup>36</sup>, journalists are regularly targeted by verbal attacks. Under the pretext of protecting state secrets and personal data, they may be exposed to legal pressure and prosecution (SLAPPs or strategic lawsuits against public participation). Last year's EU Progress Report also emphasizes the problem of unfavourable working conditions. All this affects the quality of work of journalists, and they often decide to leave the profession.

<sup>33</sup> It included representatives from the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Free Press Unlimited (FPU), the International Press Institute (IPI), and Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT).

<sup>34</sup> Association of Journalists of Macedonia. 2023. Media Freedom in North Macedonia: fragile progress. Available at: <https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/EN-Fact-Finding-PFM-Report-251023-web.pdf>. Accessed 05.11.2023

<sup>35</sup> European Commission, 2023. North Macedonia 2023 Report. Available at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD\\_2023\\_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf). Accessed 04.11.2023.

<sup>36</sup> Reporters Without Borders (RSF), North Macedonia. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/country/north-macedonia>

According to the Independent Union of Journalists of Macedonia, the factors that contribute to journalists considering leaving the profession include low salaries, high pressure in the workplace, the expectations of the editorial board and the public, and the desire for an alternative career, especially in public relations.<sup>37</sup>

These socio-economic challenges not only diminish the role of the media as guardians of public interest, but also undermine the public's trust in journalistic content. To address these issues, robust legal frameworks that protect the rights of journalists are needed, along with initiatives to improve their working conditions and salaries. Such measures are essential for preserving media integrity.

<sup>37</sup> Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers of Macedonia (SSNM), *Why Journalists are Leaving the Profession (Зошто новинарите бегаат од професија)*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3I5aZWW>

## Online media and absence of adequate regulatory measures

The Media Freedom Act<sup>38</sup> emphasizes the need for harmonized rules that will protect the independence of all types of media – both online and offline. The lack of transparency in relation to ownership and financial structures is a particular problem with online media platforms, with some of them even imitating existing media to spread fake news.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, in the context of the regulatory challenges faced by the online media sector in North Macedonia, the European Commission's Recommendation on internal safeguards for editorial independence and ownership transparency in the

<sup>38</sup> European Parliament, 2023. *European Media Freedom Act*. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0336\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0336_EN.pdf) Accessed 02.11.2023.

<sup>39</sup> Trpevska, S. and Micevski, I., 2021. *Media Sector Hotspots in North Macedonia: Decisive Reforms Long Overdue*. In: Aspen Institute Germany. December 2021, p.32. Available at: [https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/2021\\_Aspen-Germany\\_Media-Freedom-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf](https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/2021_Aspen-Germany_Media-Freedom-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf). Accessed 21.10.2023

media sector becomes very relevant.<sup>40</sup> This Recommendation, (EU) 2022/1634, encourages member states to implement measures that promote media pluralism and media ownership transparency. It points out the need to establish a dedicated online media ownership database, under the responsibility and management of a national regulatory body. This database will provide detailed, easily accessible information about media ownership, including regional and local media, thereby enhancing transparency and public access to ownership data. All media will be legally required to publish information about their ownership structure and guarantee the independence of editors. *‘We have such provisions in our media laws, however, we need to further specify them, amend them and make them applicable to online media,*

40 European Union, 2022. Commission Recommendation of 14.9.2022 on ensuring the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists and other media professionals (2022/C 346/01). EUR-Lex. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32022H1634>. Accessed: 14.11.2023.

*which currently are not subject to legal regulation.*<sup>41</sup>

The expansion of online media and the widespread use of social networks have increased the space for spreading hate speech and disinformation. The study ‘The Political and Economic Basis of Media and Communication Models Spreading Disinformation and Hate Speech’<sup>42</sup> notes that in the period 2019-2020 disinformation in the country was most prevalent in online media

41 Vasilevska, M. 2023. Dr. Trpevska: The new EU act should regulate the relations between media and digital platforms and social networks that have taken on the role of gatekeepers (Д-р Трпевска: Новиот акт на ЕУ треба да ги уреди и односите меѓу медиумите и дигиталните платформи и социјални мрежи кои си ја презедоа улогата на гејткипери), 18 February 2023, Available at: <https://racin.mk/intervju/d-r-trpevska-noviot-akt-na-eu-treba-da-gi-uredi-i-odnosite-megu-mediumite-i-digitalnite-platformi-i-socizijalni-mrezhi-koi-si-ja-prezedoa-ulogata-na-gejtkiperi/>

42 Nikodinoska, V. 2020. The Political and Economic Basis of Media and Communication Models Spreading Disinformation and Hate Speech. Macedonian Institute for Media. Available at: <https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/1230/Mediumski%20i%20koinaciskiki%20odeli%20koi%20shirat%20dezinformacii%20i%20govor%20na%20mraza.pdf>. Accessed 01.12.2023

and on social networks. This is confirmed by the statistical reviews of the work of the Press Complaints Commission at the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CEMM), according to which online media have been the most frequent violators of professional standards in recent years<sup>43</sup>.

In order to regulate the sphere of online journalism, in 2019, the Register of Professional Online Media was established, as an initiative of the Association of Journalists and the Council of Media Ethics. This initiative, proposing that the media wishing to join the self-regulatory body have to comply with certain criteria and rules<sup>44</sup>, was welcomed by the European Federation of Journalists.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia, Press Complaints Commission – statistical overviews, available at: <https://www.semml.mk/komisija-za-zhalbi/statistichki-pregledi>

<sup>44</sup> Council of Media Ethics, Rules for Admission. Available at: <https://www.semml.mk/chlenstvo/pravila-za-chlenstvo>

<sup>45</sup> European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), 2019. North Macedonia: EFJ welcomes initiative aiming to strengthen self-regulation. [online] 19 December 2019. Available at: <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2019/12/19/north-macedonia->

However, the inevitable need for harmonization of legislation with EU standards still remains. The European Commission's report for the screening process, published in June, emphasizes this urgency, as well as the request for North Macedonia to align its laws with EU law to effectively combat the growing threats of disinformation, especially those coming from online sources.<sup>46</sup>

[efj-welcomes-initiative-aiming-to-strengthen-self-regulation/](https://efj-welcomes-initiative-aiming-to-strengthen-self-regulation/). Accessed 15.11.2023.

<sup>46</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2023. MK Cluster 1 Draft Screening Report. Available at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/MK%20Cluster\\_1%20Draft%20screening%20report\\_external%20version.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/MK%20Cluster_1%20Draft%20screening%20report_external%20version.pdf). Accessed 17.11.2023.

## (Un)professionalism in newsrooms and the role of media self-regulation

Adherence to professional standards in newsrooms is essential for maintaining public trust and media integrity. Reports from international organizations indicate significant problems in this regard.

The 2022 Freedom House report<sup>47</sup> presents a worrying picture of the media environment in the country, characterized by widespread disinformation and a notable lack of professionalism. This is followed by the World Press Freedom Index of 2023.<sup>48</sup> Despite the fact that the country is ranked 57th, which is an improvement of 33 places compared with 2021, it is still indicated that the spread of disinformation and lack of

47 Freedom House, 2022. North Macedonia: Freedom in the World 2022 Report. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-macedonia/freedom-world/2022>. Accessed 02.11.2023.

48 Reporters Without Borders (RSF), North Macedonia. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/country/north-macedonia>

professionalism contribute to the decline in public trust in the media, exposing independent media to threats and attacks.

On the other hand, despite the fact that the public broadcasting service shows signs of progress towards functional independence and professionalism, it still struggles with fundamental challenges. These include persistent financial constraints, staffing issues, etc.<sup>49</sup>

An often overlooked, yet crucial aspect of media pluralism, is the accessibility of different social groups and local communities to media platforms and the public sphere as a whole.<sup>50</sup>

To address these challenges, there is an urgent need to strengthen self-regulation

49 Association of Journalists of Macedonia. 2023. Media Freedom in North Macedonia: fragile progress. Available at: <https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/EN-Fact-Finding-PFM-Report-251023-web.pdf>. Accessed 05.11.2023

50 Esch, V. and Palm, V., 2021. Media Freedom in the Western Balkans. Aspen Institute Germany. Available at: [https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/2021\\_Aspen-Germany\\_Media-Freedom-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf](https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/2021_Aspen-Germany_Media-Freedom-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf). Accessed 19.11.2023.



mechanisms in newsrooms, ensuring strict adherence to professional standards and ethical journalistic practices. In this regard, the role of the Council of Media Ethics, a self-regulatory body that handles complaints related to violations of the ethical framework, becomes crucial. In 2022, a significant portion of the Council's decisions (49.37%) referred to violations related to the accuracy and verification of information. However, it has been observed that this body is exposed to pressure from political, economic, and media entities in its activities.<sup>51</sup>

The need for strengthening self-regulation is also emphasized in the EC Country Progress Report.<sup>52</sup> In view of this, media

associations continued to promote the established Register of Professional Online Media (promedia.mk) to increase professionalism and standards in online journalism. The need for strengthening self-regulation in online media is also emphasized in the National Strategy for Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interests.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, the Council of Media Ethics has prepared Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media.<sup>54</sup> Although only two years have passed since the adoption of this document, experts point out the need for its updating. The Complaints Commission at CMEM points out several challenges primarily related to the work of online media, such as the issue of responsibility for

<sup>51</sup> European Commission, 2023. North Macedonia 2023 Report. Available at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD\\_2023\\_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf). Accessed 04.11.2023.

<sup>52</sup> European Commission, 2022. North Macedonia Report 2022. Available at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/48ba61f0-41ae-4cff-9517-](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/48ba61f0-41ae-4cff-9517-29fac190f4bd_en?filename=North%20Macedonia%20Report%202022.pdf)

[29fac190f4bd\\_en?filename=North%20Macedonia%20Report%202022.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/48ba61f0-41ae-4cff-9517-29fac190f4bd_en?filename=North%20Macedonia%20Report%202022.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> State Commission for Prevention of Corruption. National Strategy of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption. Available at: <https://dksk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Nacionalna-strategija-DKSK-KONECNA.pdf>. Accessed 14.11.2023.

<sup>54</sup> Council of Media Ethics, Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media. Available at: <https://semm.mk/dokumenti/korisni-resursi/kodeks/850-nasoki-za-etichko-izvestuvanje-na-onlajn-mediumite>. Accessed 01.12.2023.

texts and comments of readers on social networks.<sup>55</sup> The Council of Honour at the AJM is another self-regulatory body, whose role is to ensure and promote professional and responsible journalism and react when journalists violate the Code. In general, most of the media lack internal mechanisms for self-regulation in individual media organizations, such as media ombudsman or internal codes of ethical conduct.<sup>56</sup>

## Gender equality in the media – progress and challenges

The promotion of gender equality in the media is essential with regard to media integrity and implies fair representation and treatment of gender in content and media practices. This is also in line with global commitments to gender equality. The Istanbul Convention encourages media to establish guidelines and self-regulatory standards to strengthen the respect for women's dignity and contribute to the prevention of violence against them.<sup>57</sup> These standards should result in refraining from harmful gender stereotypes and spreading a degrading image of women. At the same time, it is important that these measures are taken with due respect for the fundamental principles on which the operation of the media is based, namely freedom of expression, freedom of the

55 Tuneva, M., Nikodinoska, V., 2023. Imperative of Boosting Capacities and Reinforcing Effectiveness – Media Self-regulation in North Macedonia. Macedonian Institute for Media

| 56 Ibid

57 Council of Europe. Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/text-of-the-convention>. Accessed 22.11.2023.

media, and freedom of artistic expression.<sup>58</sup> The promotion of gender equality, as a significant indicator of media integrity, is of crucial importance and in line with global efforts, such as the UNDP's Gender Equality Strategy 2022-2025.<sup>59</sup>

The 2022 Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) indicates a medium risk of 65% in relation to gender equality in the media in the country. However, in private media, there is an underrepresentation of women in executive roles, with less than 18%, while in editorial positions, women make up about 39% in the audio-visual sector and 48% in the radio sector.<sup>60</sup> In addition,

the topics of gender equality and gender-based violence are often outside the focus of media coverage.<sup>61</sup>

Therefore, it is imperative to strengthen gender equality in the media sector, not only to comply with international standards but also to create a media environment that authentically represents and respects the diversity of society. This also refers to private television stations that need to align their programmes and content with contemporary gender equality standards and impartially report on gender issues.<sup>62</sup>

58 Tuneva, M. and Boskova, N., 2023. Ethical Reporting on Gender Based Violence in North Macedonia. Res Publica. Available at: <https://respublica.edu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/etichko-izvestuvanje-za-rodovo-baziranoto-nasilstvo-mk-1.pdf>. Accessed 09.11.2023.

59 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2022. The Gender Equality Strategy 2022-2025. Available at: <https://genderequalitystrategy.undp.org/#:~:text=The%20Gender%20Equality%20Strategy%202022%2D2025%20sets%20out%20an%20ambitious,rigid%20responses%20to%20gender%20equality> Accessed 03.11.2023

60 Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2023. Media Pluralism Monitor

2023. European University Institute. Available at: <https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor-2023/> Accessed 01.11.2023

61 Tuneva, M. and Boskova, N., 2023. Ethical Reporting on Gender Based Violence in North Macedonia. Res Publica. Available at: <https://respublica.edu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/etichko-izvestuvanje-za-rodovo-baziranoto-nasilstvo-mk-1.pdf> Accessed 09.11.2023.

62 Micevski, I. 2019. Gender in the Media 2019: Analysis of Gender Aspects in Children's Programmes Broadcasted by the National Terrestrial Television Channels. Available at: <https://resis.ko/attach/rodot-vo-mediumite-2020.pdf>

In addition, regulatory bodies, civil society organizations, and media must actively promote gender equality and improve media literacy, as these are key steps towards a more inclusive and fair media environment. In accordance with this, the regulator has already established cooperation with civil society organizations and media, focusing on promoting media literacy and addressing human rights topics, including gender equality and respect for the rights of persons with disabilities by broadcasters.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup> European Commission, 2023. North Macedonia 2023 Report. Available at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD\\_2023\\_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf). Accessed 04.11.2023.



# Findings from the Interviews and focus groups

challenges, gaps, and opportunities for improving media integrity

## Media integrity – What does it entail?

Stakeholders define media integrity as a multi-layered concept, which is of primary importance for democracy in society. Media integrity encompasses not only the independence of the media in terms of freedom of expression but also their economic

sustainability and transparency. Integrity is essential for gaining public trust and fulfilling the media's role in society, but it is often undermined by economic, political, and institutional corruption.

The participants interviewed for the analysis emphasize that media integrity implies serving the public interest, as well as

resisting undue influences such as political pressures, clientelism, and economic power. ***'It's not just about accurate and fair reporting, but also about the culture the media entity nurtures, its business communication, and transparency regarding ownership and editorial processes.'***

A strong and self-sustaining media industry is considered essential for achieving media integrity. However, stakeholders note that such a robust industry is currently lacking in the country. ***'The media integrity also depends on the awareness and actions of the newsrooms and management structures. This encompasses the commitment to being credible, professional, and unbiased.'***

Economic challenges, such as low salaries and poor socio-economic status of media professionals, are seen as a significant threat to media integrity. ***'These conditions often lead to vulnerability to various pressures, jeopardizing journalistic integrity. This situation is further exacerbated by the lack of financial***

***independence from state bodies.'***

Stakeholders also emphasize the importance of the media's role in defending the public interest and advocating for the public good. ***'I inextricably link integrity with two other concepts, which are identity and immunity of the media. And they are interconnected. If a media outlet does not create an identity, it will hardly maintain or create integrity. When you combine them together, it is a good foundation for creating immunity, which is very necessary, knowing the circumstances in the country.'***

The creation of a distinct media identity and the separation of management structures from journalistic and programming aspects is key to ensuring journalistic freedom and objectivity, according to the interviewees. Such a division will ensure that the media can function effectively without influence from political or business centres.

In short, stakeholders view media integrity as a complex phenomenon that requires

a balance of independence, professionalism, objectivity, and transparency. This balance is crucial for the media to effectively serve the public interest and contribute to a healthy democratic society.

## Media integrity in the country is significantly affected

In the discussions about the state of media integrity in the country, the stakeholders point out the diverse landscape marked by complexities and challenges. According to the assessments, media integrity and the overall 'health' of the media industry are significantly affected by multiple factors. *'The current state of media integrity in the country is poor as a result of a three-decade absence of many of the values that should characterize it. Although there have been some changes in recent years, at the same time, there is a deterioration because the promised but unfulfilled reforms of the media system essentially lead to regression or generate retrograde processes.'* 'We are,

*unfortunately, a society in which the media lack integrity, with certain exceptions only. This is because there are phenomena that have persisted over the years and still remain, although the facade has slightly changed. It is true that North Macedonia is progressing on the media freedom lists, but clientelism has not been eradicated, it existed and will exist, it is how media work.'*

One critical issue regarding media integrity refers to the blurred lines between media ownership and editorial policy. This mixing of roles leads to concerns about content manipulation, with some journalists perceived as serving centres of power, rather than the public interest. *'Political influences and those of the owners, along with economic constraints, have led to a decline in trust in the media and their following.'* *'Pressed by political and business interests, many newsrooms merely relay information without critical analysis or context, failing to protect the public interest.'*

The disrupted media integrity is also linked to the deteriorated socio-economic status of journalists and media workers.

Other factors also hinder or present additional challenges to media integrity today. *'Here, I would primarily highlight the tectonic changes in the media industry brought about by the massive use of the internet and the explosion of social networks, which have taken on the role of 'intermediary' in the conveyance of information to the public.' 'The media industry is at the same time under attack from the disinformation production industry, as mentioned by Reporters Without Borders in their latest Index. The media space is bombarded with 'alternative truths' that create confrontation and polarization, resulting in apathy among a large part of the politically undecided public and departure from the media, as research by the Reuters Institute - University of Oxford has shown for several years now.' 'The Priebe report included a clear diagnosis of the entire media sector with anomalies that prevent society from developing in a*

*democratic direction. It was then occupied by the ruling party through mechanisms for state advertising and in various other ways, the newsrooms were, literally, suffocated. The sector was freed from that influence, however, some systemic anomalies have not been resolved, most of which relate to the socio-economic status of journalists'.*

## Dissecting the challenges to media integrity

As already mentioned, numerous factors contribute to the challenges surrounding media integrity. All interviewees agree that economic difficulties are a significant factor. At the same time, many media entities rely on strategies for quick revenue generation that actually compromise journalistic standards. This economic instability often leads to a conflation of media ownership and editorial control, with owners influencing content for political, personal, or commercial gains. This concentration of media



ownership threatens media diversity and pluralism.

Journalists face pressures from owners and business interests, which leads to self-censorship and avoidance of topics that might confront powerful entities. *'This phenomenon has led to changes in media content, where pseudo-events with marketing or PR tricks often replace real news, breaking journalistic codes.'*

The intertwined roles of director and editor-in-chief in many media outlets further blur the lines between business interests and editorial independence. This convergence of roles compromises the integrity of journalistic content, with editors often yielding to managerial or ownership pressures.

Dependence on political funding erodes the economic independence of the media, influencing editorial policies and allowing political entities to directly influence media narratives.

Moreover, the rise of disinformation, fuelled by the pervasive use of social networks, adversely affects traditional

journalistic practices. This environment makes it difficult for professional media to maintain integrity amidst the spread of alternative truths and sensationalism.

The situation is further aggravated by the small market size, with a large number of media entities, which leads to 'sale of integrity' to political and business elites. The Macedonian media market has been oversaturated since the very beginning of its development in the early 1990s. There were no attempts to regulate market consolidation and reduce it to the number of players that the market can sustain, while ensuring a higher quality of programmes and content, offered to the audience. From the beginning, there was a policy that the self-regulatory 'hand of the market' would take care of the situation, and that those that could not withstand the competitive struggle would quickly close and disappear".<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Media Development Center, 2020. How to consolidate audiovisual media services market. Available at: <https://mdc.org.mk/kako-do-konsolidacija-na-pazarot-na-audiovizuelni-mediumski-uslugi>

Political advertising with several million euro in each election cycle further solidifies clientelistic relationships, not only with the ruling party but also with opposition parties. Financial independence from the government and power centres is fundamental to maintaining media integrity, a concept that is currently endangered by the stalled media reforms and the reintroduction of state advertising. According to the proposed amendments to the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, 0.1 percent of the state budget revenues generated in the previous year will be used to fund state campaigns, and this will be decided by a commission composed of representatives of political parties, three representatives of the government and three of the opposition.<sup>65</sup> This is according to the legislative proposal submitted to the Assembly.

65 Stojancova, P., 2023. United parties restore government ads (Сложни партии владини реклами враќаат). Radio Free Europe, November 2023. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/slozhni-partii-vladini-reklami-vrakjaat/32687388.html>. Accessed 08.10.2023.

Journalists in newsrooms often feel insecure about their status, which affects their sense of independence and professionalism. Self-censorship limits their freedom and independent reporting. The fear of attacks, pressures, and threats affects the quality of reporting and causes distrust in journalism as a profession and in media work, in general.<sup>66</sup>

The lack of adequately trained journalists, combined with the government's strategy to produce its own media content and deliver it to the media further dilutes the essence of independent journalism.

In short, the challenges surrounding media integrity in North Macedonia, according to the research participants, are deeply rooted in economic, political, and social factors. These challenges manifest in various forms, from interference in ownership, through financial

66 Tuneva, M., Sandev, L. 2022. Safety of Journalists and Media Workers: Reality or Continuous Threat. Available at: [https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/MK\\_Bezbednost-na-novinarite-i-mediumskite-rabotnici-130322.pdf](https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/MK_Bezbednost-na-novinarite-i-mediumskite-rabotnici-130322.pdf). Accessed 14.11.2023.

dependency, to political pressures and spread of disinformation.

## Online media in transition: regulatory challenges and building integrity

A key issue related to the online media sector, according to the interviewees, is the lack of transparency regarding ownership structures and funding methods. This opacity not only fosters mistrust among the audience, but also undermines media integrity.

The legal framework regulating the media sector is considered outdated and disproportionately in favour of traditional media. Current media laws are deemed inadequate to address the specificities and challenges of online media. Consequently, the Online Media Association proposes urgent amendments to the Law on Media to explicitly include online media in the definition of media.

The process of aligning legislation is expected to ensure a balance between the need for regulatory oversight and the preservation of journalistic freedom and expression in the online space. *'It should be understood that without a strong media industry, which is currently predominated and will continue to be increasingly predominated by online media, there will be no media with integrity and journalism resistant to pressures, censorship, clientelism, and compromises. The state will not succeed in saving the so-called traditional media by giving them money to cover their losses and especially the inability of media owners to reform and adapt to market challenges. Print media need to find their so-called niche market and adapt to it, while TV stations should focus on developing video production, for which they will secure legitimate financial support from powerful economic entities. These are the trends in the region and more broadly in Europe.'*



## **The Role of the media in promoting inclusion and representation in North Macedonia**

In the diverse social fabric of North Macedonia, where different ethnic and cultural groups coexist, the media play a key role in promoting understanding, tolerance, and social inclusion. In this context, media integrity encompasses the responsibility for fair and accurate representation of all segments of society.

The interviewees believe that the media, especially the public service, play a crucial role in the affirmation of social diversity, and also in shaping public perception of gender equality. The Strategy for Gender Equality 2022 – 2027<sup>67</sup> also sets priorities for the media. It points out the need to promote gender equality by presenting positive examples, more frequently inviting women as speakers in debates and other programmes with guests, and increasing the representation

<sup>67</sup> Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. Strategy for Gender Equality 2022 - 2027. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/stuMR>

of content addressing gender equality issues, including gender mainstreaming in the broadest range of topics covered by the media.

The responsibility of the media implies overcoming stereotypes, promoting fundamental human rights, and raising awareness of issues of gender equality, inclusion of persons with disabilities, the importance of intercultural communications, etc. The media's approach to these issues can significantly influence societal attitudes and behaviours.

Regular and accurate coverage of these topics is essential for creating a more inclusive society. To ensure that the public interest is fulfilled, it is imperative to ensure that media policies and practices are inclusive. This, according to the interviewees, involves not only addressing representation in media content but also promoting diversity among the media workforce. Thus, the media can play a key role in bridging societal divisions, fostering mutual understanding, and promoting a more inclusive public discourse in the country.

## The role of the media in the fight against corruption: challenges and responsibilities

The interviewees emphasize that media integrity is connected to a great extent with resistance to corruption. ***'Ethics and corruption are not equivalent.'*** The primary duty of the media should be to uncover abuses of power, misuse of public funds, and clientelistic relationships, which is the cornerstone of functional legal systems. ***'We have a major problem with the fact that many media have not defined their role in the fight against corruption and do not speak in the public interest, they remain silent, do not comment, stay aside.'***

Receiving state funding for advertising presents a significant challenge to media integrity. ***'With the draft law in the Assembly proposing that all private media should receive money, systemic corruption is introduced. The Law is about to be voted. We cannot talk about integrity when so many private media are funded by***

*public money to advertise public institutions. There is no room for journalism, professionalism, and integrity.'*

According to some of the interviewees, the internal practices in place in newsrooms play an important role in dealing with corruption in the media. Internal understanding of working principles and commitment to fighting corruption in media organizations are of vital importance. This includes establishing reporting channels and protecting whistleblowers. *'One possible solution to improve media integrity is to establish internal contact points in media organizations. This will provide an opportunity for citizens to report ethical issues or problems related to media operation, which will encourage two-way communication and public engagement.'* *'You cannot talk about corruption outside if you are not transparent enough about what is happening in your newsroom. On the one hand, you protect the public interest, but you lack the courage for transparency regarding ownership, salaries...'*

*'In addition, the regulatory body itself should be more accessible to citizens, allowing them to report suspected corruption in the media. Such mechanisms will protect the anonymity of the complainants and potentially improve public trust in the media.'*

Investigative journalism, especially related to online platforms and media established by citizens, plays a key role in the fight against corruption. *'The effectiveness of the media in the fight against corruption is also closely linked to the functioning of the judicial systems. Without legal consequences for the uncovered corruption, the media's efforts risk becoming futile.'*

The media's potential to serve as a tool in the fight against corruption depends on their own integrity. If the media system fails to provide a framework for media integrity, the media risk not only becoming a victim but also perpetuating corruption within their own ranks.

# Conclusions

The research into the state of media integrity in the country reveals a complex mosaic of challenges. Central to these challenges is the intertwining of media ownership and editorial management in newsrooms. This raises serious concerns about journalistic independence, leading to the need for establishing a clear distinction between ownership and editorial control to ensure reporting integrity.

Regarding the economic situation, the media's dependence on political and state advertising often compromises editorial independence, highlighting the critical need for financial stability that does not undermine media freedom. Achieving this balance is vital to maintaining a media environment consistent with the principles of impartiality.

It is confirmed that it is also important to strengthen the regulatory framework ('soft regulation') for online media, ensuring increased transparency

and accountability. Furthermore, it is also essential to develop the self-regulatory framework as a basis for the promotion of ethical and professional standards in all media sectors.

Inclusion and diversity are important dimensions of media integrity, especially in relation to gender representation. The media's responsibility extends beyond mere reporting; it is necessary to reflect the different voices and experiences in society. This means fair and objective representation of gender and different communities in the media content, overcoming stereotypes, and promoting fundamental human rights. Gender mainstreaming in media policies and practices is not just a matter of ethical journalism, but it is essential for fostering a more inclusive and balanced public discourse.

Furthermore, improving the socio-economic status of journalists and building their capacities are crucial for maintaining high journalistic

standards and ethics. Improving working conditions and ensuring continuous professional development are key to nurturing a media environment that values integrity, inclusion, and ethical reporting.

Self-regulatory bodies, in collaboration with media and civil society organizations, should promote the role of self-regulation and the existence of self-regulatory mechanisms through information campaigns, training, education, and other events and activities to raise public awareness among various segments of the public. In addition to regulatory improvements, there is also an urgent need for improving media literacy. Educating the public on how to distinguish between credible information and falsehoods is essential to building a more informed audience.

In summary, the path to strengthening media integrity in North Macedonia refers to directly addressing these multifaceted challenges. By focusing on these critical areas, the media environment will evolve into a space that is not only independent and transparent but also reflects the diversity of society and is committed to respecting the principles of democracy and public welfare.





# The path to media integrity

## Recommendations

In this section of the document, the knowledge gained from the analysis is synthesized into a set of recommendations that are formulated in a way that they can be applied in different

aspects of the media sector. Each recommendation also represents a call to action, or an invitation to all stakeholders to accordingly take part in the activities for strengthening media integrity.

## **Advancing media integrity: Initiatives for independence and alignment with European standards**

- ▶ Establish a media support fund (investigative journalism fund) based on objective criteria, ensuring independence and alignment with European standards. This fund should support public interest journalism, independent of the influence of various power centres.
- ▶ Ensure stable funding of the public broadcasting service.
- ▶ Revise the rules on media ownership concentration to improve media pluralism and editorial independence.
- ▶ Align the forms of state support for the media with European regulations and the provisions of the Media Freedom Act proposed by the European Commission.
- ▶ Take steps to develop community media and promote the non-profit media sector.
- ▶ Restore legal guarantees for independent selection of

editors-in-chief and directors of newsrooms in the Law on Media.

- ▶ Media organizations should adopt internal acts that will ensure separation of newsrooms from ownership and managerial influences.
- ▶ In accordance with the National Strategy for Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interest<sup>68</sup>, establish a legal obligation

<sup>68</sup> State Commission for Prevention of Corruption. National Strategy of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption. Available at: <https://dsk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Nacionalna-strategija-DKSK-KONECNA.pdf>. Accessed 14.11.2023.

for public sector institutions and local government units to publicly disclose all contracts concluded with any media and strengthen the criteria for awarding state aid to print media.

## Ethical, educational, and structural reforms for responsible journalism

- ▶ Create and implement internal mechanisms for addressing ethical issues and operational problems, facilitating public participation in the monitoring of the media work.
- ▶ Provide continuing education for media professionals to keep up with industry advancements, focusing on producing diverse and inclusive content.
- ▶ Develop and maintain internal mechanisms for addressing ethical dilemmas and operational challenges in the newsrooms.
- ▶ Establish a mechanism for handling public complaints in the newsrooms.
- ▶ Foster cooperation among media for coordinated action in the public interest through joint projects and activities.
- ▶ Active engagement of media leadership to ensure they are up to date with the latest regulations and practices related to the

industry development. In this regard, regular and more active cooperation with the media regulator, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, as well as with professional media and journalistic organizations and associations, is recommended.

- ▶ Ensure newsrooms are engaged in improving media literacy among citizens, which will enable them to make a clear distinction between credible journalistic content and disinformation.
- ▶ Promote gender equality in programmes and contents and ensure greater representation of women in leadership positions in the media.
- ▶ Establish and maintain a framework for collaboration between academia, media organizations and associations, and the media to strengthen media integrity. Such collaboration could also include joint workshops,

training programmes, and resource development, whereby media professionals could be educated on scientific principles, data interpretation, and critical analysis of scientific information. These initiatives would enable journalists to more effectively report on complex scientific topics in an understandable and responsible manner.

- ▶ Self-regulatory bodies, in collaboration with media and civil society organizations, should continuously promote the role of self-regulation and the existence of self-regulatory mechanisms, through information campaigns, training, education, and other events.

## Improving socio-economic conditions and the legal framework

- ▶ Amend the existing media legislation to ensure special protection of the social and labour rights of journalists and media workers. The legislation should be aligned with the provisions of the EU Media Freedom Regulation, the EC Recommendation No. 6650 of 2021 and No. 1634 of 2022, as well as with the Charter on Working Conditions of the European Federation of Journalists.<sup>69</sup>
- ▶ Media organizations should have internal acts in place that regulate the relationships between owners, management, and journalists. Journalists and media workers should have employment contracts guaranteeing them

all their employment rights.<sup>70</sup>

- ▶ It is of paramount importance to ensure support to the unionization of journalists and media workers and the negotiation of collective agreements. It is advisable to follow the example of some European countries (such as Denmark), where collective agreements provide for the protection of labour rights of both full-time and freelance journalists and media workers.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> This is one of the conclusions from the workshop on media reforms held in October 2023, as part of the Second Phase of the Project “EU for Freedom of Expression: Alignment of National Media Legislation with EU *acquis* and European Media Standards”

| <sup>70</sup> Ibid

| <sup>71</sup> Ibid



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