

The Government of the Republic of Slovenia welcomes the fact that the Council of Europe Platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists is taking stronger interest in the media situation in Slovenia and counts on constructive assistance in tackling this issue in Slovenia. This is not just an issue of meeting the basic ethical standards in journalism which ought to be the basic postulate of the work of the media, but also an issue of media ownership and media plurality in Slovenia, and last but not least of real threats to some journalists. This is why your attention should be drawn to the broader context of the media situation in Slovenia.

First, some historical facts in the development of the media market in Slovenia should be highlighted. The majority of the main media in Slovenia have their origins in the former communist regime, and even in the late 1990s the positions of editors-in-chief were held by the former members of the infamous security service *UDBA* that earned its reputation for persecuting and torturing numerous political prisoners of the former regime. In this context it is important to mention the former editor-in-chief of the daily *Delo*, Mitja Meršol, who was also an influential member of the International Press Institute.

The national broadcaster, RTV Slovenija, is financed by all the citizens of Slovenia but was even until 2004 directly run by the former communist structures. At the helm of the RTV Slovenia Programme Council, which adopts decisions on programme guidelines of this extremely important institution, was Dr Janez Kocjančič, a former President of the League of Communists of Slovenia in the former Yugoslavia and for a period President of the predecessor party of the Social Democrats. The same body was later headed by Dr Jernej Pikalo, a Social Democrats' minister in two Slovenian governments. You probably agree that it was an unbearable situation from the standpoint of free operation of the media, especially the public broadcaster.

The problem of advertising throughout the initial period of democratic development must also be highlighted. More or less, all attempts to create new media that would not be based on the legacy of the totalitarian past have failed, as unlike the existing media, new media did not receive money from advertising. One of the few media that managed to survive despite the advertising blockage was the Radio Ognjišče, a religious radio station. It survived, first of all, because people supported it with their own contributions, without advertising.

The situation changed partly only in the period 2004–2008, when for the first time the parties originating in the former regime lost the authority for four years, whereby they were also prevented in part from directly exercising their interests in the media. During this period, the law governing the operation of RTV Slovenija also changed with a view to promoting greater plurality of the media space. As a result, in some media that in one way or another are financed by all citizens, individuals who were not connected with the former totalitarian party also took on leading roles.

But already in 2008, when power was taken over by the government of Borut Pahor (Social Democrats), there was a tremendous persecution of all editors and journalists who were not part of the former regime's network. Thus, in 2009, when the Social Democrats party was in power, Bojan Veselinovič was appointed as Director of the Slovenian Press Agency and one of his first actions was to dismiss editor-in-chief Borut Meško, who was critical towards the then Government. A few months later Mr Meško died from severe illness. In this and several other cases, it was not only about the free speech of particular reporters, but worse – it was about the idea of how to destroy the existence of a certain journalist and his family.

In 2012 the then Director of RTV Slovenija, Marko Filli, even managed to change the Statute of the institution in order to terminate the post of editor-in-chief Uroš Urbanija who was critical towards the Government.

Similar actions were taken in some private media, where editors who were critical towards the left parties were rapidly removed from management positions. Later they were also dismissed or simply left their profession due to immense pressure from their superiors. Among them were, for example, the former editor-in-chief of *Primorske novice*, Tino Mamič, and former editor-in-chief of *Delo*, Peter Jančič.

As none of them belonged to the former regime's network, they did not receive any support while suffering bullying, not from the Association of Journalists of Slovenia as the main journalists' organisation, nor from the Union of Slovenian Journalists. It is sad that these two organisations have also not been capable of protesting decisively in the last ten years, when many other journalists have been dismissed in suspicious circumstances and by the abuse of legislation.

Furthermore, during all this time media have been going through the ownership consolidation. With the consent of left governments, the majority of main media have been sold to individuals, who are known to the general public as Slovenian tycoons, many were also members of Forum 21, established by the former President of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Slovenia, Milan Kučan, later the first President of the Republic of Slovenia.

In addition to all these external circumstances affecting the work of journalists, journalists themselves also contributed to their increasingly poorer public image. Jumps from journalism to politics are, unfortunately, too common for the public to fully trust the integrity of journalists. For example, Member of the European Parliament Tanja Fajon (Social Democrats) was at first reporting from Brussels for the national broadcaster RTV Slovenia, then, literally overnight, appeared on the Social Democrats' list of candidates. Similarly, journalist Irena Joveva overnight became the Member of the European Parliament of the List of Marjan Šarec, the party that was until recently in power.

These are not isolated cases of political rewards for certain journalists who appeared in public as the greatest fighters among journalists against parties that did not arise from the network of the former regime. Thus, journalist Rok Praprotnik, known to the public as one of the most radical writers of articles against the President of the Slovenian Democratic Party Janez Janša, was appointed Vice-President of the Commission for the Prevention of Corruption and soon after, without any experience in banking, took over the post of Director of Compliance Centre in the national bank NLB. Something similar happened to the journalist Dejan Karba, who used to write for the main Slovenian newspaper *Delo* and was proven to have lied about the Slovenian Democratic Party as well as about the Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rode. Mr Karba left journalism literally overnight and ran in the local elections as a candidate on the list of the Social Democrats party. Not being elected, the party got him a job in the Cabinet of their minister, Dr. Jernej Pikalo, initially tied to the minister's term of office. Right before the Government fell, they ensured him a permanent position in the state administration.

Indeed, several other cases of interference and unscrupulous intersection of journalism and politics have been detrimental to the journalist profession. Majda Širca, former Minister of Culture under a left-wing Government coalition, returned to the public RTV Slovenia after her term of office to work as an "independent" documentary author. Even more curious was the example of RTV Slovenia reporter Mirjam Muženič: having stood for a left-wing party at the

European Parliament elections and failing to be elected, the very next day she wanted to revert to independent reporting of these events. Blaž Zgaga has a similar issue with his credibility as a reporter: he is known for his part in a Finnish documentary on the purchase of armoured vehicles by the Slovenian Armed Forces, which accused the then Prime Minister of corruption, claiming that he needed money for his retirement. The story reverberated in the Slovenian media and politics for several years. Finally, all the claims against Prime Minister Janez Janša were proven false, which destroyed the credibility of the reporter.

On the other hand, there have been some physical altercations with journalists. The worst attack in the history of independent Slovenia was carried out against journalist Miro Petek who reported on white-collar crime. Even though he barely survived the attack, no one was convicted by a final judgment. Another physical attack that happened in 2018 was aimed at the Planet TV crew who reported on the terrorist activities of the cousin of one of the most influential members of the List of Marjan Šarec party who later took power. That same year, there was also an attack on the crew of RTV Slovenija, the national public broadcasting organisation. Sadly, both governments that were in power at the time of these attacks failed to act and put an end to such violence.

In light of all of the above, the Government of the Republic of Slovenia is pleased that Slovenia has finally become the subject of international interest when it comes to freedom of the press and the general state of media in the country. In this context, warnings of the unbearable situation of the Slovenian national broadcaster should also be taken seriously. The Government of the Republic of Slovenia believes that any type of criticism about the operation of this institution cannot be considered as violation of the freedom of the press. Not only that, The Prime Minister of Slovenia is obliged to call attention to irregularities and abuses as the taxpayers' money is at stake. Well-known Slovenian lawyer Dr Matej Avbelj notes that such criticism "certainly cannot, except in a state of complete paranoia, constitute an attack against RTV Slovenija's journalists and a threat against them and I don't know what else. These journalists, along with their leadership, have now literally prohibited any intervention in their sovereignty (sic!), which probably means that no criticism is permitted now." (*Finance*, 28 March 2020) At the same time, Dr Avbelj draws attention to the seriously unbalanced and clearly biased reporting of RTV Slovenija. A similar problem was indicated in a public letter signed by numerous Slovenian intellectuals, citing, among other things, the recent analysis of the civil initiative group Glasno "on the ideological activism of RTV Slovenija: RTV Slovenija no longer provides the public with objective information but criticises the actions of a democratically elected Government in their news shows with one-sided, baseless and misleading arguments, which goes against the institution's mission." It is therefore clear that we are not dealing with concrete threats against journalists but merely calls for journalists to comply with their code of ethics.

Moreover, initiatives for a more rational spending of public funds are being misinterpreted. While many media companies are struggling to survive, even letting their journalists go, RTV Slovenija has hired an additional 400 people in the last 10 years alone, bringing the total number of the institution's employees to approximately 2,300. Seeing appeals for its Director General to be thrifty with the taxpayers' money as a form of pressure and as calls for him to

fire journalists is utter manipulation, as it is clear that journalists are only a part of the institution's employees. Given the fact that the programme schedule is shrinking more and more each day, any additional employments are making a mockery of all the citizens who are paying monthly contributions for this institution.