



South East European Network
for Professionalization of Media

Crisis Reporting:

How Media in Montenegro Coped with the Coup

By Daniela Vukčević

1. Introduction

In the course of the 2016 elections, Montenegro was shaken when media reported that a coup d'état had been prevented at the last moment when authorities arrested 20 people, mostly Serb nationals, accused of planning armed attacks against state institutions in collusion with opposition party leaders. It led to a crisis unparalleled in the previous 10 years, and the media community, already struggling with both financial difficulties and political interference, was faced with a particular challenge.

In this research, we aim to explore patterns of media reporting on this crisis, based on analysis of a small sample of media content and interviews with media experts and other stakeholders. Not surprisingly, the research confirms that the already present polarisation in the media is demonstrated clearly in how various media reported on the crisis. After the analysis of the patterns of reporting, we also provide an overview of underlying causes of these rifts and offer recommendations on possible improvements.

1.1. Deep polarisation and decline of professionalism

A total of over 100 media of all kinds, both print and electronic, operate in Montenegro, not counting web portals.¹ These numbers could mislead one into thinking that the media are thriving, and the sector profitable. The truth is that most media are struggling.² According to financial reports for 2014, the total income of all five national coverage TV stations and the 4 dailies with the biggest circulation was almost €27 million, out of which €15 million came from sales/advertising.³ The IREX Media Sustainability Index assessed annual advertising income in 2015 to be only €9 million (IREX 2016: 98). Just one illustration of the depths of the crisis could be the fact that at the end of 2016 the regulatory Agency for Electronic Media of Montenegro issued warnings to 14 electronic media⁴ for not paying broadcasting fees. Depending on the area covered by the media outlet, debts ranged from a couple of hundred euros to almost €50,000.

¹ IREX, Europe & Eurasia Media Sustainability Index 2016, p. 103

² Ibid.

³ Daniela Brkić, Slaba primjena regulative i nastavak kontrole nad medijima, 2015, p. 12

⁴ http://www.ardcg.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=29&dir=DESC&order=date&Itemid=26&limit=10&limitstart=0 Accessed 26 December 2016

Many media survive thanks to low production costs, primarily meaning low-paid journalists; at €400 per month, the average salary for journalist is well below the national average of €500, according to research done by the Montenegro Media Union in 2014.⁵ The situation is not improving. Research done by the Union at the end of 2016 showed that eight out of 10 media employees in the sector found their economic and social status to be worse than five years previously,⁶ and almost one-third of them had left their jobs in media in the previous three years.⁷

The fact that violence and physical threats are part of everyday journalistic practice in Montenegro doesn't add to the lure of the profession and leads to self-censorship out of fear of reprisals. In addition, impunity for actual violence against media personnel is a problem to which almost all reports by international organisations point.⁸ Reporters without Borders ranked Montenegro at the 106th position in 2016, which compared to the 114th position in the previous year indicates a slight improvement.⁹ Yet, the old problems persist. Media-related legislation is fairly good and “up-to-date”, but the time-consuming defamation cases involving high compensations remain a pressing problem. In addition, the profession lacks strong self-regulatory mechanisms. The Journalistic Code is accepted by the whole media community, but there is not one self-regulatory authority recognised by all media. The Journalists' Self-Regulatory Body (NST) operated until 2010, when after a conflict related to one TV show, representatives of the media critical of the government left. Two years later, media mostly perceived as pro-government founded the Media Council for Self-Regulation, but the rest of the media community didn't join it. At this point, the media that criticise the government mostly have established their own internal self-regulatory mechanisms – i.e. media ombudsman.

This is just one perspective through which the deep polarisation of the media is obvious. All relevant reports dealing with the media scene in Montenegro stress this fact.¹⁰ All public service media, and a few private ones, whose ownership structures overlap (Brkić 2015: 11), are perceived as supportive of the government, while on the other hand the dailies *Dan* and *Vijesti* (TV, the daily and the web-portal whose ownership structures overlap), are seen as critical of the government. The political instrumentalisation and lack of integrity are the most extreme manifestations of the polarisation. “The media scene is still a battlefield of political and journalistic interests, resulting in perennial divisions within the media community. Political and commercial motivations drive these internal divisions, and they become quite visible during elections and political confrontations.” (IREX 2016: 97). Being supportive of the government is a lucrative decision, since only pro-government media can count on receiving the largest part of

⁵ OEBS and CEDEM research, Social status of journalists in Montenegro, 2014, p. 10

⁶ Marijana Camovic, Indikatori nivoa medijskih sloboda i bezbjednosti novinara, 2016, p. 9

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ EU Commission, Montenegro 2016 Report, 2016; also Reporters without Borders, Montenegro, 2016

⁹ Reporters without Borders, Montenegro, 2016

¹⁰ Freedom house, Montenegro- Freedom of the press 2016

the public advertising funds.¹¹ The latest European Commission Country Report on Montenegro stressed the importance of transparent and non-discriminatory state advertising.¹² But contrary to these demands, a report by the NGO Centre for Civic Education shows that almost 30 percent of state institutions and companies didn't respond to the requests for information on how they spent funds for advertising (CGO 2016: 72). Caught between politics and money, journalism in the public interest is in a tight spot.

The professionalism of journalism in Montenegro has been declining for years.¹³ “Lack of professionalism, the poor economic and social position of journalists, weak trade unions and professional organisations, and internal and external pressures on journalists have all resulted in a situation of clearly visible self-censorship. Depending on editorial policy, commercial and political interests and influences, self-censorship, and other relevant factors, the same events can be interpreted in completely different ways by different media” (IREX 2016: 102). This leads to a pervasive problem in Montenegrin journalism – commentaries where a lack of fact-checking is compounded by the author's subjectivity (IREX 2016: 101). As a result, this again leads to biased reporting in the service of political and commercial interests, rather than in the public interest.

1.2. Crisis situations in Montenegro

During elections – the ultimate encounter of politics and money – the tight spot for journalism becomes even tighter. According to the head of the Podgorica office of Radio Free Europe, Slavica Brajović few crisis events have divided the media community as much as did the events related to the general elections held on 16 October 2016: “NATO bombing in 1999, the federal elections in 2000, then it was like this or even worse... You had two armed groups – the military and police – who held each other at gun point and media who obediently supported one group or the other.”¹⁴

After the Breakup of Yugoslavia in 1992, the republics of Serbia and Montenegro established the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which in 2003, renamed itself Serbia and Montenegro. Federal presidential elections had been separate since 2000, when Montenegrin authorities distanced themselves from Belgrade. Because they opposed certain constitutional changes, Montenegro boycotted the federal presidential elections, but the opposition, still close to the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, decided to hold elections on their own. Being under the federal authorities, the military was closer to the opposition and Belgrade officials, while the police was under the local authorities and closer to the Montenegrin government. This division culminated with a referendum on independence in May 2006, and Montenegro declared independence on 3 June of

¹¹ NVO Centar za građansko obrazovanje, *Jednake šanse za sve medije?*, 2016

¹² EU Commission, *Montenegro 2016 Report*, 2016, p. 5

¹³ IREX, *Europe & Eurasia Media Sustainability Index 2016*, p. 101

¹⁴ Interview Slavica Brajović, Podgorica, 16 January 2017

that year. Since then, no event had created such tension, according to TV Vijesti news editor Radomir Kračković. “I hadn’t before witnessed as ‘flammable’ a situation as this one in Montenegro, meaning that there could easily be riots and conflict”, Krackovic said.¹⁵ The alleged coup d’état attempt and events from the 2016 elections were, however, the exception (more below).

1.2.1. Case study: Coup amid “to be or not to be” elections

In the general election campaign of 2016, held a decade after the referendum on independence of Montenegro, the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) presented the vote as another referendum on the survival of the state. On the other hand, the strongest opposition coalition, the Democratic Front (DF), went into a campaign with a motto “Us or him” (referring to then Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic). This created a sense of a “to be or not to be” situation, and neither words nor money were spared. Besides resources obtained from the state’s budget, the political subjects gathered three times more donations than they had for the 2012 elections.¹⁶ Three times as much money also was invested in advertising in TV and print media, according to the Centre for the Democratic Transition (CDT).¹⁷ For weeks during the campaign, statements made by DPS officials and some media, firstly the Pink M television station, founded by Serbian network RTV Pink, were implying and then openly accusing¹⁸ the DF coalition of being financed by Russia. The opposition in turn accused the DPS of buying voters’ support.¹⁹ Media were dominantly acting in the interest of a particular political camp. “In this campaign, it was proven once more that every political party has its media that supports it to a larger or smaller extent. That was obvious in the number of minutes, headlines, placement of reports and their length and so on... The election campaign in the media started long before it formally started”, said journalist Marijana Camović, a correspondent for analiziraj.ba.²⁰

Three days before the elections, the Head of the Police Administration, Slavko Stojanović, said in a statement that riots could break out on the day of the elections and the police were ready to act.²¹ These claims heated up the already flammable situation. On the morning of the election day, information was published that a group of 20 Serbian citizens was arrested at the border during the night because they intended to cause riots and bloodshed, by shooting at people

¹⁵ Interview Radomir Krackovic, Pogorica, 16 January 2017

¹⁶ Milica Bogdanovic, Kampanja u kojoj se ne štedi, 14 October 2016. Accessed 26 December 2016. Available at <https://www.cdtmn.org/2016/10/14/kampanja-u-kojoj-se-ne-stedi/>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-montenegro-election-idUSKCN12D2QV> Accessed 16 January 2017

¹⁹ <http://cdm.me/arhiva/izbori-2016/dps-placa-dijaspori-da-dode-da-je-glasa-dukanovic-kaze-da-nema-nista-od-toga/2/?comments=true> Accessed 18 January 2017

²⁰ Interview Marijana Camovic, via Skype, 21 January 2017

²¹ <http://www.vijesti.me/izbori2016/stojanovic-na-dan-izbora-moguci-neredi-policija-spremna-da-reaguje-907351> Accessed 18 January 2017

gathered in front of the Parliament and “arresting” the prime minister. At first, information was published by Pink M, cdm.me and the portalanalitika.me²², based on an unidentified but allegedly well-informed source. And that is where the problems with the reporting during the crisis started, Radio Free Europe’s Brajović said. “One really professionally problematic TV station started broadcasting that information before the Prosecutor’s Office made statements. It caused terrible confusion among the voters, political subjects, and journalists. The information was broadcasted every 15 minutes. We ‘had’ the Prosecutor’s Office only at 3 pm, and a relatively incomplete statement, and it sounded very alarming,” Brajović said.

Voter turnout was larger than before, reaching over 70 percent. Religious and political leaders alike called on citizens to stay at home that evening in order to prevent any kind of problems on the streets. The night and months that followed were peaceful, with riots and bloodshed avoided, but the grounds for the clash between media were set. The media bowed to one of the two versions of the events – either undisputedly supportive of the Prosecutor’s Office and their perspective on the events or questioning the official version thereof. The results of the elections point to the ruling party being the winner both at the ballot box and in terms of the narrative of the crisis.

2. About this research: Methodology and sampling

Since the elections on 16 October 2016 through to the beginning of 2017, some 670 reports²³ were published in Montenegrin media, electronic, print and online mentioning the name of the first to be accused of plotting a coup d’état – Bratislav Dikić – meaning that on average nine reports were published daily mentioning his name. This research is based on analysis of 12 comprehensive media reports published in the aforementioned period, during which time the polarisation of the media was strongest.

In early February 2017, Special Prosecutor Milivoje Katnić accused the two Democratic Front leaders, Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, of participating in planning the foiled terrorist actions, and claimed that Eduard Shishmakov, identified as the main organiser, was working for the Russian intelligence services. But by that time, the media had already had four months to fill – with speculation, allegations and doubts.

The analysed media sample includes media considered as pro-government and anti-government: the dailies Vijesti, Dan, Dnevne Novine and television station Pink M. Specific media reports issued by these media were selected as being the most illustrative and/or most extreme representatives of the dominant reporting frames (more below).

²² <http://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/247351/policija-uhapsila-najmanje-15-naoruzanih-osoba-medu-uhapsenima-bratislav-dikic> Accessed 26 December 2016

²³ Result based on the search of media archives www.arhiva.me. The search showed that in the same period 915 reports mentioned the phrase “coup d’état”.

The research includes five interviews done with experienced journalists and media professionals, from both media perceived as pro-government (Pink M and Skala Radio) and anti-government (Vijesti) (Full list at the end of this report).

3. Research results: Coverage of the “coup”

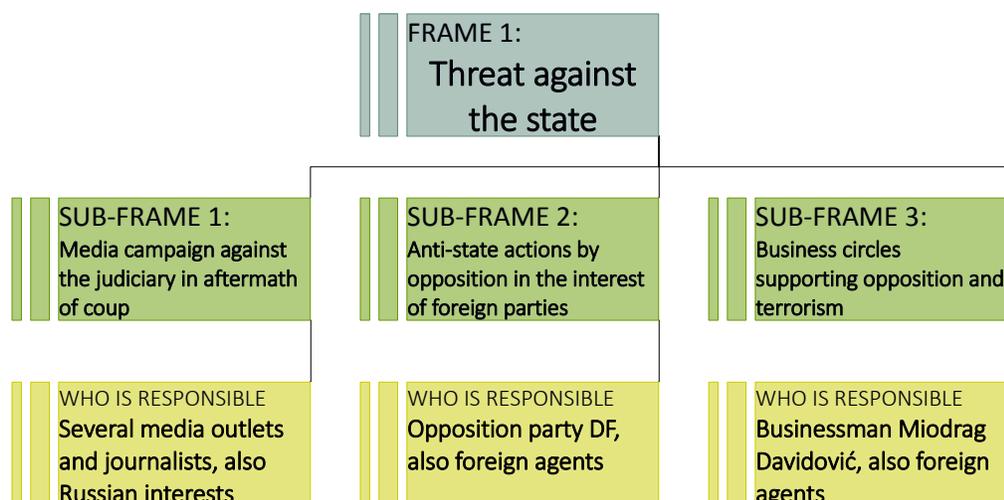
The results of the media content analysis reveal problems that are presented in the context of two overriding frames about the “coup”:

- The arrested group of 20 Serbian citizens who intended to commit acts of terrorism and “arrest” or even kill the prime minister. They were supported by opposition figures and some media in Montenegro.
- The alleged coup d’état²⁴ is a hoax planned by the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists in order to influence the outcome of the elections.

Media perceived as pro-government supported the official version as the undisputed truth; those perceived as anti-government cast doubt on the official version, with some even claiming that the whole affair was a hoax. Even when reports were more balanced, the presentation of the alleged coup often lacked fact-checking and analysis of the relevant issues.

3.1. Framing the problem: Threat against the state and the prime minister

Under the frame which undisputedly supports the official version of the events, on the day of the election there are several sub-frames in which the crisis is presented.



²⁴ The Prosecutor's Office and other officials do not use the term “coup d’état”. Officially, the aforementioned charges were for attempted terrorism and creating a criminal organisation, but in the media and for opposition representatives, when talking about this case the term “coup d’état” has been “domesticated”.

All sub-frames are tightly interconnected, building up a construction in which the Democratic Front organised the terrorist attempt in order to sway the elections in their favour, the media supporting the DF obviously supported the planned attacks, and Miodrag Daka Davidovic²⁵, an opposition supporter and media financier, took part in organising them. How the relations are perceived is explained in a Pink M report: *“Even though the editors in Daka’s [businessman Miodrag Davidovic] tabloids knew all of this well, they still decided to give him [Nemanja Ristic, one of the Serbian Citizens accused of participating in organising the coup] free PR space in order to attack and insult the state’s institutions and officials, probably because this hard-core criminal, agile supporter of the Democratic Front whose propaganda these tabloids have been promoting in Montenegro, and these activities include defence of one of the accused.”*²⁶

The most prominent frame of the problem is ***Media campaigning against the state judiciary.***²⁷ In this sub-frame fit two of the selected reports by Pink M; one refers to the reporting of the dailies Dan and Vijesti and the other deals with the reports of the daily Dan in particular. The problem is not implied but very openly stated in opening lines of both reports. *“The tabloids under control of the Russian centres and Miodrag Daka Davidovic keep campaigning against the state institutions that prevented the terrorist attacks”*²⁸ or as it says in the other report – *“one of the tabloids that is campaigning against the attacks on the Special Prosecutor’s Office is (daily) ‘Dan’ from Podgorica. The ‘Dan’ newsroom thinks that everything is allowed in fulfilling the orders of the foreign military intelligence services.”*²⁹ Reports fail to elaborate on the claims that “tabloids” are under Russia’s control and why they relate it to Miodrag Daka Davidovic, but they do set the tone to which media are represented as traitors of the state. Such presentation is not restricted to the media only; individuals are not spared. *“It’s no wonder that Markovic has been campaigning against the Special Prosecutor’s Office for days, dissatisfied with the fact that the prosecution is responsible for preventing the crimes in the streets of Podgorica by the nationalist criminals whose policy Markovic has been promoting for years.”*³⁰ The third report in this sub-frame is “The baker, butcher and the locksmith intended to put this on... and shot at

²⁵ Miodrag Daka Davidovic is a controversial Montenegrin businessman, owner of the company Neksan in Niksic. He was a war trade minister in the Government of SAO Trebinje. Davidovic was accused of cigarette smuggling but was not tried. Now, at the beginning of 2017, he is seen as an opposition financier and supporter. Before the opposition decided to boycott the local elections in Niksic, media reported that the first candidate in the opposition list might be Davidovic, but the rumor wasn’t confirmed.

²⁶ TV Pink M, Infomonte, 20 November 2016

²⁷ The same frame also dominated at least two of the talk show "U zizi" on TV Pink M, dedicated to the media critical of the state institutions, and one of the episodes of the talk show "Nacisto" on TV Vijesti, and one talk show, "Replika", on public broadcaster TVCG 1.

²⁸ TV Pink M, Infomonte, 20 November 2017

²⁹ TV Pink M, Infomonte, 12 November 2017

³⁰ TV Pink M, Infomonte, 12 November 2017

citizens”³¹ published in the daily Dnevne novine. Compared to the previous two, its accusations are mild but still send the same message: “*Every attempt to minimise the role of the arrested is in the defence of those who were preparing the chaos on the streets of Podgorica.*”³²

The next predominant sub-frame portrays next culprit – ***the Democratic Front (DF) is behind the intended terrorist attempts.*** These claims in the first days after the elections and arrest of the group suspected of the illegal actions were only implied, as in the Pink M report: “*Even though during the day when the members of the criminal group were arrested the leaders of the Front tried to deny the connections with them, with the only argument being that they did not personally know Bratislav Dikic, it was more than obvious to everyone in Montenegro that the group came according to someone’s order or a deal in order to support previously announced actions of Front.*”³³ As evidence for claims that the opposition was responsible, the report compares the statements of the DF leaders in the campaign with the words one of the accused, heard in leaked recordings of telephone calls. But that was just the beginning. The story evolved to openly accusing the DF of not only organising the terrorist attacks but of planning to repeat them: “*The ‘Dnevne novine’ editorial board came to information that the intent some of the Front members had on Sunday night is not put aside. On the contrary, the Front leaders in a smaller circle were organising another opposition rally, soon, in order to try and repeat the failed scenario intended for 16 October. The orders this time came from the same centre of power.*”³⁴

The third sub-frame depicts another culprit – ***businessman Miodrag Davidovic is the financier and supporter of both the opposition and the terrorism.*** Davidovic has never been mentioned by the prosecution representatives as being involved in any way. The report published in the daily Dnevne novine only 10 days after the election, however, targets him as undoubtedly involved in the events: “*What were Davidovic’s assignments, further investigation will show.*”³⁵

Under such framing, particular individuals and groups identified as responsible for the problem were targeted by some media as enemies of the state. Such labelling was not based on relevant proof but merely insinuations. The media report for example reminded of previous ones on the DF involvement³⁶, or involved claims about “strange” behaviour of opposition politicians, such as not appearing in public after the coup. “Since Sunday night, it is noticeable that the President of the New Serbian Democracy and one of the Democratic Front leaders, Andrija Mandic, as

³¹ The title refers to the report published in the daily Vijesti six days earlier – The state hit by tailor, fisherman, locksmith... Daily Dnevne Novine, p. 11. 26 October 2017

³² Daily Dnevne Novine, p. 11. 26 October 2016

³³ TV Pink M, Infomonte, 20 October 2016

³⁴ Daily Dnevne novine, pp. 2, 3. 21 October 2016

³⁵ Daily Dnevne Novine, p. 3. 28 October 2016

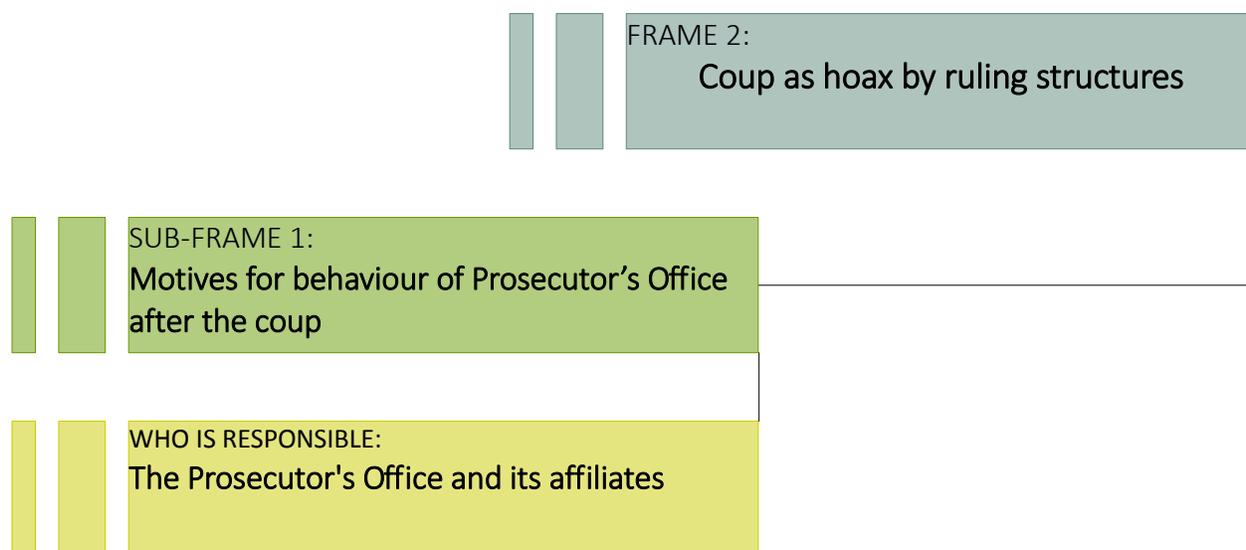
³⁶ TV Pink M, Infomonte, 20 October 2016

well as Branko Radulovic are not present in the public, and especially Democratic People's Party leader Milan Knezevic, whose behaviour since then is strangest, is nowhere to be found?!³⁷

In some cases, media involvement in the alleged coup was presented as fact. One such campaign at Pink M was directed against the editor of daily Dan: "*In fulfilling the orders by the foreign military intelligence services, the daily 'Dan' editorial board thinks that everything is allowed*"³⁸ or "*When he [the daily's editor, Nikola Markovic] writes, he doesn't bother himself with facts*"³⁹. The pattern of accusations against all those critical of the Government as the enemies of the state, both the opposition and the media, is not new. On the contrary, it is common that the opposition is denounced as "not the opposition to the ruling DPS but the state", and that media critical of the government are accused of undermining the stability of the state.

3.2. Framing the problem: Coup as hoax

Opposite framing of the problem questions the official representations of the coup, and involves some critique of government intuitions.



The frame "**Coup as a hoax by the ruling structures**" fits six reports in total published in the dailies Dan and Vijesti. The most explicitly formulated sub-frame was that the *actions of the Prosecutor's Office were questionable and instrumentalised*. The Prosecutor's Office was named as responsible. In the reports analysed there was no explicit mentioning of the ruling DPS party. In the days that followed the alleged coup and the statements of the opposition politicians claiming that the DPS had orchestrated the whole event – particularly having in mind the

³⁷ Dnevne novine, 21 October 2016

³⁸ TV Pink M, Infomonte, 12 November 2016

³⁹ TV Pink M, Infomonte, 12 November 2016

editorial policy of the media claiming that the institutions in general are under the influence of politics – even though not all the reports mentioned the DPS, it was implied that the “coup” was a fabrication by the DPS to discredit the political adversaries and win the elections.

The first report published in the daily *Vijesti* a day after the elections questions the official version of the events in the headline “Death Squad or a Political Game?” and the article’s lead paragraph: “*The police and prosecution didn’t state for which political party the arrested Serbian citizens worked, who allegedly intended to kill Montenegrin citizens and take over state institutions. The weapons they were supposed to use to commit these criminal acts weren’t found, nor were the Montenegrin citizens connected to them.*”⁴⁰ A report published three days later also questions the official version in the same manner. The headline “The state hit by a tailor, fisherman, locksmith...” implies that group members couldn’t have threatened the security of the state because of their professional occupations⁴¹. Ten days later, in another report with the headline “A story full of holes”, the official version is also questioned in the first paragraph. It starts with the comparison of the operation in which the alleged group of terrorists was arrested on 16 October 2016, which “ended overnight and with no casualties”, and on the other hand the operation from 1972 when 10,000 officers of the former Yugoslavia at the mountain Radusa confronted 19 terrorists who intended to separate Croatia from Yugoslavia, when 13 men died. The interviewee, a former intelligence officer who took part in the second action, said that the official information about the events on 16 October were a “fairy tale”. Both media reports express doubt in the official version of the events but apparently neither asked the Prosecutor’s Office for explanations.

Two reports published in the daily *Dan* depict Sasa Sindjelic – who according to the Prosecutor’s Office had a key role in planning the whole operation and then became a collaborating witness – as untrustworthy.⁴² The daily interviewed two people connected to Sindjelic, his wife and an acquaintance in an obvious conflict with Sindjelic, in a somewhat problematic manner. Both claimed that he was collaborating with the secret police and connected to the Serb nationalistic movement “*Cetnicki pokret*”. In one of the reports it is noted: “The President of the Chetnik movement, Bratislav Zivkovic, claims that Sasa Sindjelic was offering money to the members of this movement two days before the elections in Montenegro to come to Podgorica, as it was obvious later, to frame them for the attempted terrorist attacks.”⁴³ No additional information was sought from the Prosecutor’s Office nor from any other counterpart that might confirm this or balance it out. This reporting pattern can be interpreted as tendentious and as a campaign against the witness.

⁴⁰ Daily *Vijesti*, p. 14. 17 October 2016

⁴¹ In another report however, the interviewee, a former counterintelligence general presented as an expert on state security issues, says that the occupation of the alleged terrorists is not important nor decisive in the assessment if someone is a terrorist and that professions such as *fishermen, construction workers, musicians are the most suitable for the manipulation by coup organisers*. Daily *Vijesti*, p. 4. 30 October 2016

⁴² <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-sindjelic-analiza/28135192.html> Accessed 29 January 2017

⁴³ Daily “*Dan*”, p. 2. 6 November 2016

However, a third report by the daily Dan is an interview with the father of one of the accused, Aleksandar Aleksic. Unlike the previous two, this one is in favour of the accused. It portrays him as a hard-working individual who as such couldn't have taken part in any terrorist actions. The authenticity of the claims aside, the report failed to explain why someone who is a taxi driver and a family man, a fact that was pointed out couple of times, couldn't have participated in the event.⁴⁴ *“If he were up to something, he wouldn't have told us where he was going. We are in shock since the day we heard that he was arrested. At first, we didn't know what it is all about, but now we are aware that our Sasa was framed”*, Aleksic is quoted as saying.⁴⁵

3.3. Solutions and prognoses

Contrary to the problem frame which is in some reports very explicitly stated, no solution is clearly presented in any of the media reports, only subtly implied. Even in the case of the very harsh accusations, such as those against the media where some of the reports even explicitly quoted Article 387 of the Criminal Code, which the media allegedly broke⁴⁶, there was no explicit call for action by the Prosecutor's Office or the police. Similarly, the actors depicted as being responsible for the solution or the prognosis are only subtly implied. In the frame where the opposition, the media and businessman Miodrag Davidovic are identified as those who caused the problem, acting against them is implied to be a solution. Even though some of the reports made serious allegations about the media and opposition, including the claims about the Criminal Code breach and the cooperation with the foreign intelligence services, no open criticism against or call for actions by the police, prosecution or judiciary was included.

The same is the case with the reports presented in the second frame, critical toward the official version of the events. Serious doubts about the actions of the prosecution were stated, but again there was no call for action, no solution on how to overcome the problem, and it can only be assumed that the implied solution could be some, although unspecified, counteraction against the power-holders and/or institutions.

3.4. Respect for journalistic norms

A quick glance at the Journalistic Code, adopted by all the media, is enough to see that these reports violated a series of the code's principles. Most common is the lack of the respect to the

⁴⁴ Aleksandar Aleksic in the meanwhile signed the plea agreement, admitting his participation in the events and agreeing to pay a €100 fine and serve five months in jail.

⁴⁵ Daily "Dan", p. 9. 20. November 2017. At the end of January, Aleksandar Aleksic signed a plea agreement admitting to have committed acts he's been charged with and agreed to serve a five-month sentence. The plea agreement he signed was to be approved by the Higher Court in early February 2017.

⁴⁶ <http://www.pinkm.me/glavne/vazi-li-clan-387-kzcg-za-urednike-vijesti-dan-a-i-portla-in4s/> Accessed 20 February 2017

first principle, precisely guideline 1.2. Accuracy⁴⁷ -- “The right of the public to know cannot be justification for sensationalist reporting. Therefore, journalists cannot distort the information by exaggeration, inadequate accentuation of one of the stories perspectives or biased reporting.” Exactly this has been the case in many of the reports analysed.

The handling of confidential sources, their double checking, the relevance of the sources and the right of the individuals they accuse to answer have been disputable. All of this is defined in guideline 1.3 of the Journalistic Code.⁴⁸

The last, and not least important nor at least present in the media, on the contrary, is the violation of the basic rule “facts are sacred, opinion is free”.⁴⁹ Many comments are presented as established facts. This is a common problem in Montenegrin media not related nor specific to the crisis situation. The IREX Media Sustainability Index refers to this as a pervasive problem in the media which has produced, as it says, some dubious journalistic forms such as the “commentary report”.

Another issue that came to the spotlight in the crisis reporting is the (ab)use of the media’s right to criticise. The Journalistic Code⁵⁰ stipulates that although criticism is an essential aspect of journalism it cannot be understood as the right to slander or insult.

3.4.1. (No) pluralism, (no) research

All 12 media reports included only one perspective. Even more indicative is the fact that half included no identifiable source. All anonymous sources were supportive of a frame “Threat against the state”. The rest of the reports, those supporting the frame “Coup as a hoax”, used various sources but the credibility of some were questionable. The two reports by the daily Vijesti fully relied on the documents by the Prosecutor’s Office – but headlines and lead paragraphs mixed facts with comments by the author. A few reports partially relied on the initial document published by the Special Prosecutor’s Office – the “warrant to conduct an investigation” was quoted or referred to.

An interviewed news editor, Radomir Krackovic, summarised the situation in the following way: “Some media closer to the Government used this situation to fight with not only the Democratic Front but with the whole opposition. On the other hand, certain critical media haven’t had the tact in the reporting and their only goal was to counter any doubt that there was an attempt at terrorism and to judge that it’s all a set-up. That included a brutal clash with the representatives of the Prosecutor’s Office.”

⁴⁷ Journalistic Code, p. 7

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Journalistic Code, p. 9

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 14

In terms of in-depth reporting, the problem is basically one-dimensional. Some crucial information, not just in these reports but in this crisis reporting as a whole, haven't been verified. It has been said that the weapons to be used in the terrorist attacks had been dismantled and thrown "into the lake" by one of the accused, Mirko Velimirovic, (*Velimirovic informed the Prosecutor about the attacks planned*), by the instructions of the Prosecutor – why and where this had allegedly been done was not made known. Also, two Democratic Front members of parliament, and the driver of one of them, were accused in early 2017 of helping to plan the terrorist attacks. It is still not clear whether this has been done based on some evidence or, as the public speculates, according to statements by the collaborating witness (Saša Sindjelic) or one of the former Serbian intelligence members made in a TV show.

Even those that provided an in-depth perspective failed to provide the "other side", and therefore those reports are perceived as biased. For example, two reports by the daily Dan questioned the reliability of Sasa Sindjelic as a collaborating witness. Two interviewees made serious accusations against Sindjelic, but the reporter failed to provide the stand of the Prosecutor's Office, and what is more worrying, the report did not make it clear whether they even asked for it. Another report by the daily Vijesti featured an interview with a former intelligence officer, undoubtedly an expert on state security-related issues, but his doubts and suspicions about the events on 16 October 2016 were not elaborated, no additional explications were asked for and no other perspective given.

Public broadcaster TVCG1 didn't include various voices in their reports, just like other analysed outlets, but showed less siding with the two main stakeholders. On the other hand, two reports by TVCG 1 pointed to a serious lack of knowledge on the matter and a lack of background investigation. On 10 November, TVCG 1 reported that the first accused, Bratislav Dikic, would sign the plea agreement with the Special Prosecutor's Office. On the day after, eight other media published this information either as their own or quoting TVCG 1. The public broadcaster got this information from an unofficial source and didn't manage to get confirmation from the Special Prosecutor's Office. Less than a week later, it proved to be a factual error: TVCG 1 aired an interview with Ministry of Justice official Mirjana Lakovic Draskovic, who said that according to the law it is not possible to sign a plea agreement for the criminal act Bratislav Dikic had been charged with. The interview made it clear that TVCG 1 had previously broadcasted false information.

3.4.2. Plenty of sensationalism but no hate speech

Ten out of 14 analysed reports include some sort of sensationalist reporting, with a few different elements. With the lack of relevant and reliable information, trivialities took over the news reporting and Facebook posts or interpretations of what one person meant to say became relevant news subjects.⁵¹ For example, the daily Dnevne novine in detail elaborates what the Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic meant to say, in effect stating that the group arrested for the coup attempt was dangerous. "*The source of Dnevne novine, close to the investigation in Serbia,*

⁵¹ "*Even by a superficial overview of the (Facebook) posts by Nemanja Ristic it is easy to see that besides political [views], he shares both ideological attitudes as well as political role models with the DF leaders, connecting the Front members with the Russian anti-NATO centres*". TV Pink M, Infomonte, 20 November 2016.

says that Vucic (...) used a proper term to describe Dikic and his group. *Basibozuk*, as defined in a dictionary, refers to an irregular member of the Turkish army, a persistent and cruel robber. Today they would be called 'the hounds of war'. So, Prime Minister Vucic, using the term 'basibozuk', didn't say that the Dikic group is harmless, but that they could fight such an illegal paramilitary group more easily than those who are behind them."⁵² The previously mentioned article of the daily Vijesti focused on the professions of the arrested group members while problematically indicating that people with little education couldn't be terrorists.⁵³

An emotional and overhyped writing style is common, especially in the reports by the daily Dan and station Pink M. The interview with Dragan Aleksic, the father of one of the accused, Aleksandar Aleksic, for the daily Dan is expectedly overemotional: *"He didn't even serve in the military and doesn't know how to hold a rifle. We are not criminals. We are an honourable and honest family living off our work. Sasa is a taxi driver and has four children and a wife that he honestly supports off his work."*⁵⁴ The tone of the whole article, both the headline "Accused of terrorism and didn't even serve in the military" and the subhead "He was going with his godfathers to Ostrog, and in the car he had only [religious] icons. Let them show what they found in his car instead of deceiving the public that my son is a terrorist – says Dragan Aleksic" is also overemotional. The report mentions three times that the accused is a taxi driver and twice notes that he supports his wife and four children through his work.

While sensationalism was common and coupled with tendentious reporting against particular individuals or groups, we did not find examples of hate speech or discriminatory reporting in the analysed media sample.

In the whole crisis reporting period, not one but two accused were misidentified. In the beginning, media had been wrongly naming the accused Sasa Sindjelic, who later got the status of a collaborating witness, as Aleksandar. This continued months after the Prosecutor's Office stated that his name is actually Sasa (and not a diminutive of Alexander). And what is more worrying, there was a confusion regarding the name of Eduard Shishmakov, who is accused as being the main organiser. At first, the Prosecutor's Office said that his name was Eduard Shirokov, but couple of months later the Special Prosecutor explained that his surname was in fact Shishmakov and that the suspect was connected to the Russian intelligence services. Subsequently, some media mistakenly used a third version – Shimrakov – while others kept on using both names – Eduard Shirokov Shishmakov.

3.5. Causes and elements of news coverage

Three factors determined reporting in this period. The first was the fact that the Prosecutor's Office failed to inform the public in a simple, clear manner and on a regular basis. After the

⁵² Daily Dnevne novine, p. 11. 26 October 2017

⁵³ "The state hit by a tailor, fisherman, locksmith..." daily Vijesti, pp. 12-13. 20 October 2016

⁵⁴ Daily Dan, p. 9. 20 November 2016

initial statement made on the day of the elections, the next opportunity to make things clearer came when the Special Prosecutor Milivoje Katnic took part in the “Nacisto” talk show on TV Vijesti four days after the elections. On YouTube alone, the video of the show has been seen almost 15,000 times, garnering some 3 to 5 times more views than other episodes,⁵⁵ indicating how interested the public was. “I think that the Special Prosecutor made a terrible mistake when he came to TV Vijesti and gave an interview to Petar Komnenic. In that show, we already had too many things piled up that opened space for speculation. And now you have the opposite effect – the Prosecutor’s Office has closed itself (*to the public*) because they did bad PR of the event”, said Slavica Brajovic⁵⁶. After organising another press conference approximately two weeks later, the Prosecutor’s Office issued a paragraph-long statement⁵⁷ with a bottom line message that they would no longer be answering the questions of the media because “the Prosecutor’s Office has stated all the information that can be made public in this phase of the proceeding”. A request to answer two questions for the purposes of this research was also declined. As a response to the lack of official information, the media continued to speculate. Instead of providing the answers to the dilemmas, the Prosecutor’s Office opted for another TV show appearance of the Prosecutor Milivoje Katnic at the beginning of the 2017 during which he said there was evidence that official Moscow institutions were behind the planning of the coup. This information was published by many leading world media, but still local outlets were not given the opportunity to get the answers to potential questions arising from that interview.

The second factor is the lack of fact-checking, accompanied with a lack of knowledge on particular issues, such as judicial proceedings. For example, information that one of the main suspects, Bratislav Dikic, signed a plea agreement was uncritically published in almost 10 different media outlets but only a few days later proved to be false. “We have trouble as journalists understanding what the Prosecution is telling us. ‘It was said in a warrant to conduct the investigation...’ We quote something we don’t even know what it is, but that is the only document that has leaked”, Slavica Brajovic said⁵⁸.

Furthermore, media lack resources. This brings us to the beginning – with ever more people leaving journalism, and with media cutting expenses and failing to invest in the further education of journalists, it is hard to organise work in such a way that journalists are specialised in any single area. “That becomes obvious especially in the situations like this ‘coup d’état’, where it was obvious that they do not know the way the state operates, who is in charge of what, and so

⁵⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnuNtGgePn0> Accessed 16 January 2017

⁵⁶ Interview with Slavica Brajovic, Podgorica, 16 January 2017

⁵⁷ “Regarding the case of criminal act – creating a criminal organisation and the terrorism attempt – the Prosecutor’s Office has stated all the information that can be made public in this phase of the proceeding. Having in mind the interest of the media for this case, by this we inform you that further on the Prosecutor’s Office will be giving statements only when the conditions are met. We are convinced that the public will be patient and wait for the Prosecutor’s Office to give full information, and we ask the media not to misinform and confuse the public by publishing untrue information, speculation and so-called confidential source info.” <http://www.tuzilastvocg.me/index.php/saopstenja> Accessed 16 January 2017

⁵⁸ Interview with Slavica Brajovic, Podgorica, 16 January 2017

on. Journalists must be familiar with the subject so that the report won't just consist of quotes. Our media do not invest in human resources, and there are not many journalists who are not 'general practitioners'", Camovic said.

The understanding of ethics in journalism in Montenegro is in general problematic, and ethical guidelines are not widely accepted. "We have information that 30 percent of the interviewed journalists said that they would pay for the confidential information, and 11 percent would publish a story with unconfirmed content", Camovic said.

The last, but not least important, factor is the already existing political polarisation inside the media community, based on the favourable or critical stand toward the government. Not only the crisis situations but also media reporting on all the other situations are determined by this factor. The fulfilment of the particular interests of groups behind the media has been ensured with the appointment of the directors and especially editors exclusively loyal to the respective owners. There is no regulation protecting the independence of editors. These divisions are encouraged with the abused state funding – this is particularly obvious in the non-transparent spending of the public funds for advertising.

4. Reactions by regulatory and self-regulatory bodies

Over the course of the crisis, media produced content that can be evaluated as being on the borderline of both good taste and professional standards. However, reactions by (self)regulatory bodies have been rare. In fact, the Media Council for Self-Regulation (MSS)⁵⁹ acts only on complaints, and it processed only one complaint related to the coup reporting, filed by the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists. It was related to the statement by the editor in chief of the daily Dan, Nikola Markovic, which he made as a guest of a live talk show on the public broadcaster TVCG. Markovic then said, "I am not surprised that someone wants to kidnap the man [Milo Djukanovic, former Prime Minister] who socializes... with Italian mobsters. That is his company."⁶⁰ The MSS decided that the Journalistic Code principle 4, more precisely the guideline 4.3. Insult and Slander⁶¹, had been violated because the TV show editor didn't react to this statement by Markovic. The reach of self-regulation is in general limited. "The self-regulation in Montenegro is almost non-existent and no one, especially in such situations, pays attention to the Journalistic Code. The Montenegrin Media Union made a poll of journalists where 48 percent said that ethics in journalism depend on the situation. Here, this was a situation where exactly this kind of understanding of ethics came to the fore", Camovic said.

On the other hand, the Agency for Electronic Media of Montenegro, a regulatory body, found no grounds to react to any report. Agency deputy director Jadranka Vojvodic said, "We do our regular monitoring... We have the option to issue a warning. In this case, we didn't spot any

⁵⁹ The Media Council for Self-Regulation includes the media usually perceived as pro-government.

⁶⁰ MSS; Odluka po žalbi DPS-a protiv TVCG, 21 November 2016.

⁶¹ The Journalistic Code, p. 14.

breaches of the standard that would justify issuing a warning.”⁶² A few complaints were filed to the Agency, but no decisions were made; furthermore, as Vojvodic explains, they had more to do with confrontations between media than the actual content of programming and its quality.

5. (Un)professional debate in the media community

Compared to the mild reaction of the self-regulatory and regulatory bodies, the clash between the media and debate inside the community was fierce. The reporting over the crisis period was a topic included in the agenda of the Podgorica Journalistic Forum⁶³ held in early December 2016. The dialogue fitted into one of the general frames which guided media reporting, where the ruling structures within state institutions are right, and all who question them wrong. “On the Montenegrin media scene, there is an attempt to legalise terrorism. If you ignore the facts and mock the Prosecutor’s Office, you legalise terrorism”, publicist and media analyst Seki Radoncic stated, as reported by daily Dnevne novine.⁶⁴ Another panellist, publicist Slobodan Jovanovic, claimed that some media in Montenegro aimed to overthrow the government but do not choose the means to do so. Voices that challenge such framing of events and present the role of media differently were completely omitted.

The editor of the “U zizi” talk show on Pink M, Slavko Mandic, fully agrees and puts the happenings concerning the coup in the same frame. He hosted a few shows dealing with the media, advocating that the State should persecute the media critical of government institutions. “If I had a say, I’d close them down – the daily Dan, the daily Vjesti, the weekly Monitor... Firstly, Dan and Vjesti; Monitor is insignificant because it has a small circulation, but Dan has a large circulation. Vjesti smaller, but they are also as dangerous, and their electronic media too, the portal in4s... There are more, but these are the loudest”, Mandic said.⁶⁵

In the interview included in this research, TV Vjesti news editor Radomir Krackovic noted that a statement by former Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic made two weeks after the elections, saying that “Some media are helping the terrorists”⁶⁶, initiated this kind of the conflict inside the community. “It went so far that the special shows were organised on TV Pink M, called ‘The media as the terrorist supporters’, or something similar”, Krackovic said⁶⁷. Slavica Brajovic points out that it is a common pattern: “This is not the first time. In 90 percent of the cases, you have silence and cannot get a statement or reaction; after Djukanovic gives his view, then

⁶² Interview with Jadranka Vojvodic, via Skype, 18 January 2017

⁶³ Podgorica Journalistic Forum was organised by the Media Council for Self-Regulation, an organisation of media perceived as pro-government.

⁶⁴ Daily Dnevne novine, 10 December 2016, p. 14

⁶⁵ Interview with Slavko Mandic, Kotor, 14 January 2017

⁶⁶ Daily Dnevne novine, 29 October 2016, front page

⁶⁷ Interview with Radomir Krackovic, Podgorica, 16 January 2017

everyone repeats it, like parrots. You always have that scale: toughest are the daily Informer and the TV Pink M, after that daily Dnevne novine, Pobjeda, and the others....”⁶⁸

In response to the campaign led by the pro-government media, the media critical of the government tried to defend their attitudes, but that just provoked a backlash and intensified the campaign against them.

Debate on media performance could be considered a step forward for the media community in Montenegro. However, the debates were rarely inclusive and most often one-sided, and thus it strengthened instead of countering the media polarisation. If we look at the content of the debate, it is striking how unaware of their own flaws the media are. Both pro- and anti-government media failed to recognise their own mistakes.

6. Conclusions

The Democratic Party of Socialists won 36 seats, twice as many as the second-place finisher – the opposition Democratic Front. In November 2016, the post-election coalition was formed. The DPS with the Social Democrats and the minority representatives got the majority of 42 seats in the Parliament, while the opposition had 39 seats.⁶⁹

The media have failed to cover the crisis period appropriately. There is no better proof of that than the fact four months later, key information missing has yet to be reported – for example, it is still not clear what happened to the weapons allegedly planned to be used in the coup. The media community was not able to overcome the polarisation. On the contrary, as expected, conflicts became even more obvious in this period of the crisis. The extraordinary circumstances were taken as a sort of an excuse to openly demand a wide range of “measures” against the media – from those claiming that defamation shouldn’t have been decriminalised, advocating introducing licensing for all the types of the media as a way to regulate the media, up to claims that critical media were violating the Criminal Code⁷⁰ and should be prosecuted and eventually closed. In this manner, the confrontation between the media became even harsher and the gap between those perceived as pro- or anti-government so deep that it prevented the community from reaching any common ground in how both the reporting on the post-coup crisis and the media community in general is perceived. These persistent divisions are both the biggest feature and the starting point of all the problems in media community in Montenegro.

The reporting on post-coup crisis has brought to light some worrisome trends. The lack of knowledge – both regarding basic journalistic professional standards and institutional procedures – is one of the greatest weaknesses that cannot be explained by the polarisation of the media. When combined with the lack of the good intentions, media haven’t contributed to calming down

⁶⁸ Interview with Slavica Brajovic, Podgorica, 16 January 2017

⁶⁹ <http://dik.co.me/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Konacni-rezultati.pdf> Accessed 20 January 2017

⁷⁰ <http://www.pinkm.me/glavne/vazi-li-clan-387-kzcg-za-urednike-vijesti-dan-a-i-portla-in4s/>

the situation nor to the adequate presentation of the public interest in the communication about the coup.

But not all responsibility lies with the media community. Institutions in general, and the judiciary and prosecution in particular, are rarely available or willing to meet the public interest or understand the way media operate. As with the media, this already existing problem became more obvious during the crisis. After the initial statement, press conference and the talk show appearance, the unselective refusal to answer any questions by the media proved that whoever was in charge of communication strategy was not up to the task.

A political crisis culminated beginning in February 2017 with the issue of arrest warrants for two opposition Democratic Front leaders, Andrija Mandic and Milan Knezevic. By that point, four accused of plotting a coup d'état had signed plea agreements with the Prosecutor's Office, agreeing to serve five months in jail and pay a €100 fine. The opposition is still boycotting the Parliament and the local elections in Niksic scheduled for March. EU officials⁷¹ keep insisting that the boycott is not a proper way in a democracy to fight for one's goals, but as things are now, it won't end until the new elections are called. On the other hand, Prime Minister Dusko Markovic, bolstered by the findings of international organisations that elections were regular and attitudes of the EU officials⁷², insisted that early elections would not be held.⁷³

7. Alternatives and recommendations

The gap between the pro- and anti-government media is so wide at this moment that it can't and won't be easily overcome. A solution regarding media polarisation should be looked for on several different levels. This demands complex actions in the areas of regulation and self-regulation, meaning both the state and the media community. As the media have already reached agreement on the Journalistic Code, the next and crucial step would be strengthening the self-regulatory mechanism. Firstly, that demands forming a body that would ensure the code is respected. As this might be a difficult obstacle to overcome, another option would be to encourage the media to adopt at least internal self-regulatory guidelines. That could be a way to ensure more independence for editors and journalists both from external influences, as well as those coming from the owners, and to define the norms on conflict of interest. Further on, legislation on the media should be made to ensure that transparency in the spending of public funds for the support of media, or advertising with them, that would also ensure fair competition between the media.

⁷¹ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2016/12/09/hahn-in-montenegro-unsustainable-that-the-entire-opposition-boycotts-parliament/> Accessed 18 January 2017

⁷² <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2016/12/09/hahn-in-montenegro-unsustainable-that-the-entire-opposition-boycotts-parliament/> Accessed 18 January 2017

⁷³ <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/markovic-naredni-izbori-u-crnoj-gori-2020-godine> Accessed 18 January 2017

The education and training of journalists should be the among firsts step. The focus must be on specialisation for covering specific issues, with an emphasis on how the state institutions operate and the promotion of ethical rules. Training is particularly needed in how to use information from unidentified sources, consulting multiple sources and presenting opposing views. Attention also should be paid to some of the basics of journalism – keeping an objective and impartial distance to interviewees, and making a clear distinction between factual information and rumours, assumptions, speculation or beliefs. And ethics should be returned to the spotlight.

The next level is ensuring better working conditions. At this point, professionals are leaving journalism. Under the constant threat of losing their jobs, it is unlikely journalists can be independent enough to fight for the public interest. With undefined working hours, unpaid overtime, working on holidays for below average wages, the fight to survive has priority over the fight for the public interest.

An example of how the whole crisis should have been treated is shown in the example of the testimony of one of the accused, Mirko Velimirovic. His hearing at the Higher Court was recorded and then distributed to the media.⁷⁴ There are no similar examples of communicating with the public in the recent history of the Montenegrin judiciary. This example proves that other models of operating are possible and that the advantages are obvious. Open institutions would enable media to provide better coverage on a multitude of issues and prevent them from engaging in speculation and manipulation, to the benefit of the profession and society on the whole.

⁷⁴ Vijesti.me, Pogledajte čitavo suđenje Mirku Velimiroviću, 5 December 2016.

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