

The way of influencing journalists in Kosovo

*Hyrë Tejeci**

Abstract

The debates on the press freedom have never disappeared throughout the history of print and electronic media. However, during different periods of this history, the restrictions on press freedom have been expressed more or less, in a harsh or soft way, depending on social, political, economic or cultural developments.

My professional curiosity has pushed me to conduct a research on the real shapes and dimensions of the influence on journalists and media outlets in Kosovo. The feedbacks from the questionnaires show that the influence on the journalist is bigger than the external perception.

Through the questionnaires I've tried also to understand the ways and methods of influencing. Based on the analysed questionnaires the influence on journalists is executed in a direct or indirect way, in a strong way (by order) or in a polite way (through advices and recommendations).

Key words: *The survey, exercise, influence, journalists, Kosovo*

Introduction

The right of freedom of expression includes the freedom to seek and get information. This is a key component of democratic governance. Media freedom is set also into Copenhagen criteria for EU membership.¹ A lot of discussions have commenced in Kosovo about the press freedom and the influence on media. Such debates have taken place at frequent intervals and the content was primarily based on perceptions and in some cases by commenting particular cases.

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¹ Council of the European Union, EU Human Rights Guidelines on Freedom of Expression Online and Offline, Bussel, may 2014, 14

The reports of international organisations dealing with the press freedom and protection of journalists reveal a bitter reality – the press freedom has experienced a worsening trend in many parts of the world.

The analyzes and surveys show that the media in Kosovo today, face, more or less, various forms of influence, mostly from the government, but also from the opposition actors and various groups of interest.

This was confirmed in my research about exercising influence on journalists. The survey results show that Kosovo journalists today are facing a direct and indirect influence. The journalist's tutors are mostly government representatives or holders and media owners who exercise their influence through managers or editors which are selected by them. But, there are not less influence and pressure from individuals or groups of interests, usually affiliated to people in power or with the owners of media. There are, of course, cases of influence by the opposition.

I have explored the degree of press freedom in Kosovo and restrictions on journalists. I did a comparison of censorship and self-censorship that happens to journalists. Also the questionnaire responses showed that. The reasons and problems that journalists face in their work are also explained. I have tried to show a more realistic truth about press freedom and restrictions on journalists in Kosovo. There are even, direct threats to journalists. Over 35% of respondents said that the most frequent threats are done by phone and email.

Meanwhile, over 50% say they have a dilemma whether to continue the profession of journalism, because they feel vulnerable to pressures and threats they get.

My research reveals a reasonable doubt on the honesty of journalists that participated in the research by answering to the questionnaires, bearing in mind the fear of the eventual consequences because of their answers, though they had the opportunity not to unveil the media they work for.

Research Methodology

My research was conducted during the period April-May of this year (2015). 160 journalists from various media, electronic and print, private and public (Radio Television of Kosovo - RTK), are included.

The research objective was to involve all journalists, but this objective was not achieved for different reasons, of course, objective and subjective.

The research was conducted through a questionnaire, which was distributed to journalists, who were guaranteed anonymity, in order to provide objective answers, out of concerns from any outside influences. The research is focused on determining the extent of exercising influence on journalists in their newsrooms, in the identification of perpetrators of impact and the method of exercising influence, as well as the response of journalists to unprofessional interventions.

For this reason, three responses were provided in the questionnaires, mostly optional responses: a positive, a negative response and an intermediate one. Respondents were not offered the opportunity to provide an alternative response, except three possible options, as I feared that could get their focus out of the main objectives of the research.

Results of the research

My research has reaffirmed that press freedom in Kosovo is getting worse. Compared to then, in 2015 Freedom House ranks Kosovo two countries below in regard to press freedom, or in 100th position out of 199 countries.² In the report of Reporters Without Borders, this year Kosovo is ranked 87th in the list of 180 countries, marking a

² Freedom of the press 2015, HARSH LAWS AND VIOLENCE DRIVE GLOBAL DECLINE, April 2015, 22 (https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FreedomofthePress_2015_FINAL.pdf)

deterioration from 2014, when was ranked in 80th position.³ Thanks to the technology development, information published very quickly or in real time, and they are also published on social networks, by ordinary people. Meanwhile, in the media the information is provided by censorship, even to the extent that journalists make self-censure, due to fear and pressure that have which is even more dangerous.

This conclusion is a result of the research, where most of the journalists initially say they are completely free, but on the question: **Who are the people with influence on the editorial policy of your media ?**, they said: **"People of any group of interests or people affiliated to groups of interest."** This situation is paradoxical, because if they are **completely free**, they shouldn't fill the next question.

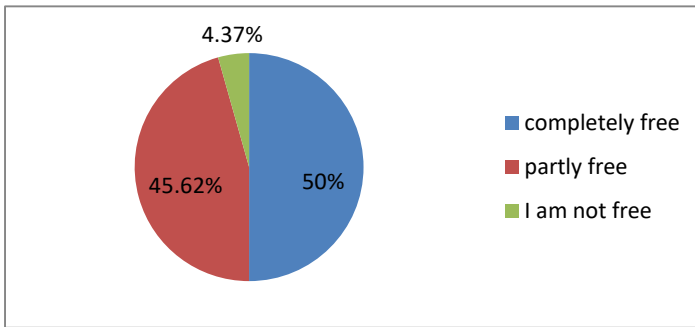


Fig. 1. Are you free to practice your profession independently?

This situation suggests that initially journalists themselves have shown a restraint, and in the following question they show a more realistic situation of the media in Kosovo.

³ Reporters Without Borders, 2015 World Press Freedom Index, Kosovo, (<http://index.rsf.org/#!/>)

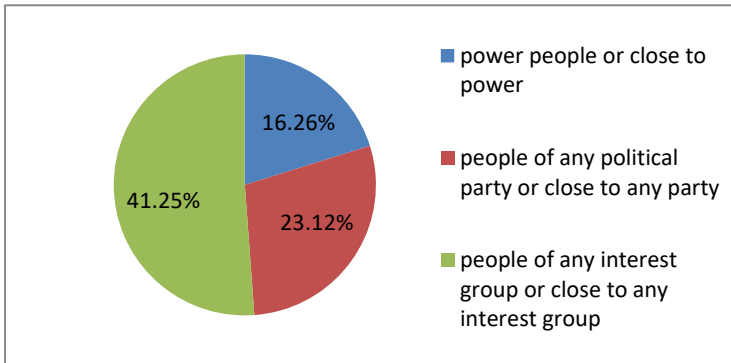


Fig. 2. Who are the people with influence on the editorial policy of your media?

Restraints and problems of journalists

In this research most of the journalists (40.62%) said that they rarely face interference in their work, but it is paradoxical that the high percentage of their responses have come under, when they say that editor-in chief is one who intervenes, even directly, in the form of guidelines, advice or by putting orders to journalists.

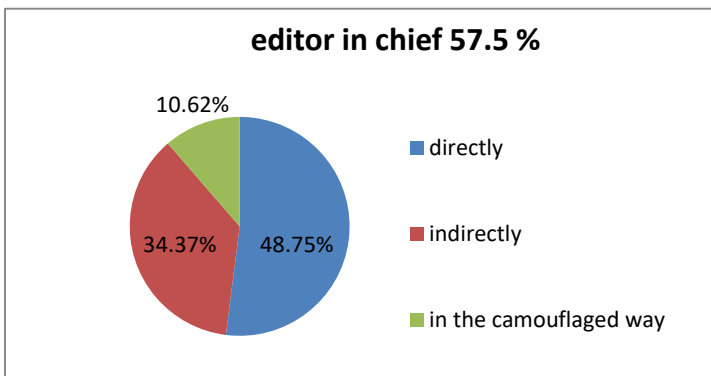


Fig. 3. Who and how people interfere in your work?

Interference in the work of journalists in the media is justified by chief editors as "interest of media (49.37%), but also as a public interest (44.37)". According to the research, journalists say that they are forced to accept several times interventions, due to the fear of becoming jobless.

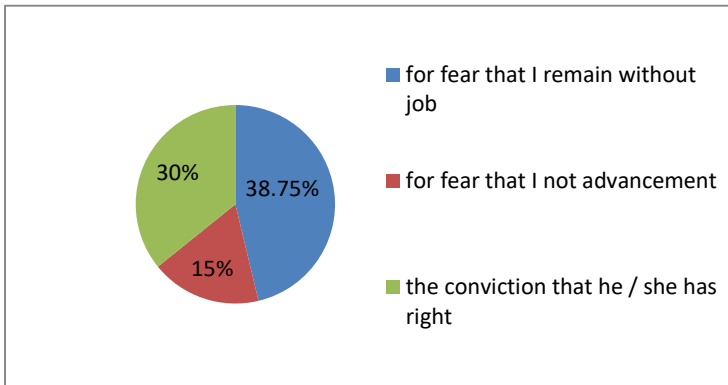


Fig. 4. Why do you accept interference in your work?

Frequent threats to journalists are the main reasons why journalists are prevented to do their work properly. In this research it has emerged that 35.62% of journalists say they face outside threats occasionally, and the most common form of threat is by phone and email, but there are some cases of verbal threats, or through third parties.

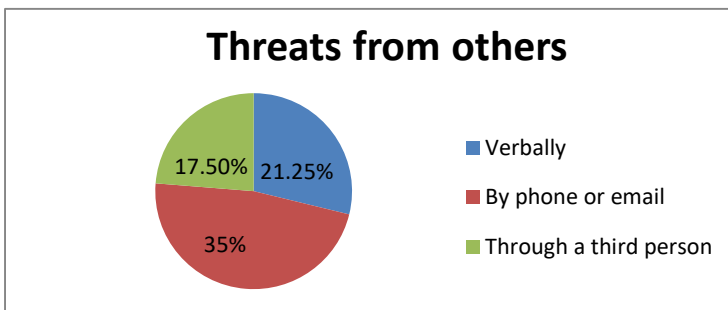


Fig. 5. In which way you face the threat?

According to the Kosovo Journalists Association, last year there have been 24 reported cases of journalists being threatened or hindered in their work, while from January to April 2015 there are 10 such cases. The Kosovo Journalists Association has warned several times on the threats to journalists, or for violation of their work, though it was never reported any of that warning or public reporting.

The public broadcaster (RTK)

Recently, many cases of concerns have revealed from RTK reporters about their constraints in exercising their profession. Their concerns are expressed even publicly, and even with protests. In this research, the majority of journalists of public broadcaster (Radio Television of Kosovo, RTK) stated also that they are partly free (63.3%).

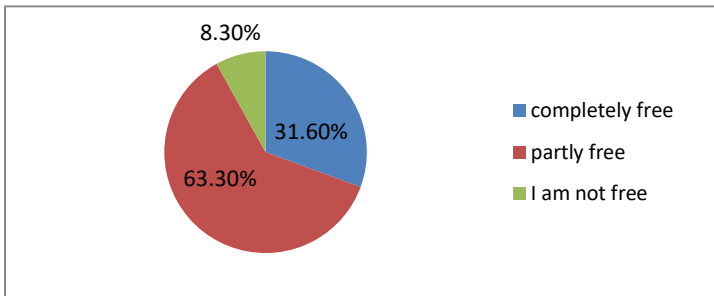


Fig. 6. Are you free to practice your profession independently?

Meanwhile, 43.3% of RTK reporters have said they face interference in their work, and it comes from the director, the editor in chief, and the editor.

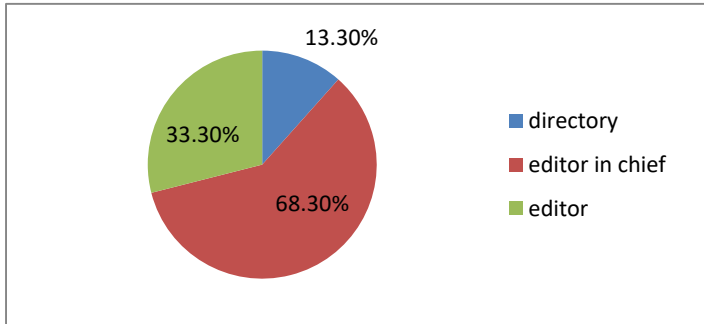


Fig. 7. Who interferes in your work?

The people who influence in the editorial policy of RTK, according to journalists of RTK which participate in the research, are: ruling people or affiliated to them, people of any political party or close to any political party, people of any interest group or close to interest groups.

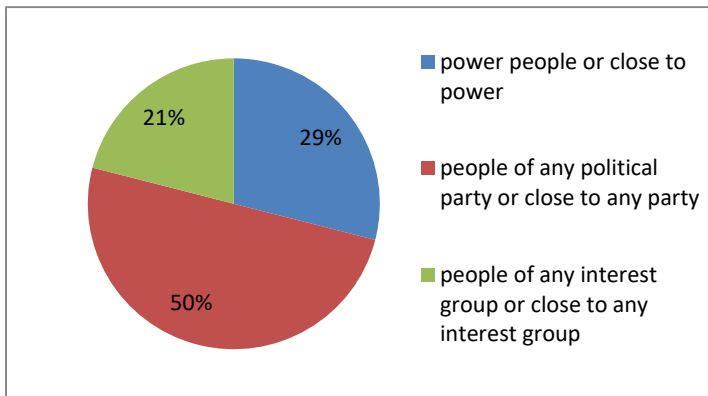


Fig. 8. Who are the people with influence on the editorial policy of your media?

According to Freedom House, in the western Balkans, where the situation is also bad, the public media tend to be pro-government, and they are dependent on a lot from the power. But, according to the

report, editorial pressure on public media from local people and businesses makes to have more self-censorship by journalists.⁴ This is understandable to some extent, because most journalists hold families with that job.

45% of journalists surveyed from the public broadcaster admitted they accept interference in their work, because of fearing to become jobless. However, the justification for intervention is reportedly made on behalf of the media (55%) and in the public interest (41.6%).

Media controllers

State media control reduces or prevents the development of democratic institutions.⁵ But the private media controlled by their funders, businesses and individuals to various interest groups. 54% of the interviewed journalists in the private media have said that people who dictate editorial policy of any interest group or close to any interest group.

Two forms of indirect pressure, which used to exercise control over the media, are advertisements and funds from the government.⁶

The Kosovo Journalists Association has raised concerns restricting freedom of the media because of the way which their funding. Freedom of Press in Kosovo is in a poor position and the government is the biggest infringer of freedom of expression, says a report by the Association. Financial dependence of the media is being stifled press freedom, says the report of KJA.⁷

Just to remind a part of a lecture by well-known Italian journalist Indro Montanelli, held at the University of Turin, on May 12, 1997: "If

⁴Freedom of the press 2015, HARSH LAWS AND VIOLENCE DRIVE GLOBAL DECLINE, April 2015, 7.

(https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FreedomofthePress_2015_FINAL.pdf)

⁵ Monro E. Prajs, Monroe E. Price, Peter Krug, Ambienti i përshtatshëm për mediat e lira dhe të pavarura, përkth. Naile Mala-Imami (Tiranë: 2002)

⁶ IREX. The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia, 2013, 95

⁷ Asociacioni i Gazetarëve të Kosovës, Raport për lirinë e shtypit në Kosovë, Prishtinë, maj 2011

you want to exercise this profession, remember well. It is a profession that requires a lot of humility ... A newspaper that should ask someone for money, it is an unintentional servant of his works".⁸

The legal framework

The rule of law in Kosovo, is a special challenge for journalists and freedom of the press. Implementation of the legislation is a problem in the field of media also. There are few cases that may have been committed by the courts,⁹ while some complaints were processed and criminal charges of journalists threatened and blackmailed their work.

Even labor law does not apply and this presents special problems for journalists, especially for those in the private media.¹⁰ Many journalists work without a contract.

Even labor law does not apply and this presents special problems for journalists, especially those in the private media. Even many media journalists work without labor contract.

The law on RTK lays down a good basis to ensure the functioning of this institution in serving the public interest, without falling under the influence of politics and in line with best practices of the EU. But, there were many remarks, especially in the recent period that the law was violated as regards to the freedom of journalists to exercise the profession..¹¹

Some examples:

- *Interference by the editor of Television of Kosova to remove the prime minister's reaction related to the selection of the new director of PTK, arguing that Prime Minister violated the law. (On 20.02.2015)*

⁸Gazeta 55, Çfarë është dhe çfarë nuk është gazetaria, 23.04.2009, (<http://gazeta55.al/cfare-eshte-dhe-cfare-nuk-eshte-gazetaria/>)

⁹ Zëri, 'Arbana Xharra mund Zhugollin edhe në Gjykatën e Apelit', Prishtinë, 26 shkurt 2015 (<http://ëëë.zeri.info/kronika/21461/arbana-xharra-mund-zhugollin-edhe-ne-gjykatën-e-apelit/>)

¹⁰OSBE, Liria e mediave dhe siguria e gazetarëve në Kosovë, raport, qershor 2014

¹¹Deklaratë kundër cenzurës e redaktorëve dhe gazetarëvetë RTK-së, Prishtinë, prill 2015

- Removal of the statement of Skenderaj municipality member at the inauguration ceremony of the new Mayor, just because of having a different position on that. (On 03. 01.2014)

- Publication in the main news edition of the results from a poll which favoured a political entity. A poll without a name, sample, address and all this occurred on the eve of the elections, something that is prohibited by the professional standards of RTK. (On 17. 04.2014)

- Termination at half of the newscasts at 23:00h, just because that news for a politician was missing. (On 19.01.2015)

- On 06.02. 2014, the Director General has dismissed the editor in charge of current affairs, only because in the "Debate" show was invited an opposition politician.

Due to all these developments in RTK, there was a reaction from the Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn. He reacted against the violations of the rights of journalists in RTK and their rights to exercise their profession independently, through a letter sent to the Board of the Kosovo Journalists of Association.¹²

Kosovo's constitution is the most important legal framework which guarantees freedom of speech and expression in Kosovo, which was adopted after the declaration of independence in 2008. The Constitution of Kosovo, guarantees media freedom and pluralism. while, the censorship is prohibited.¹³

The lack of Freedom of media in Kosovo is also criticized by the European Commission in the progress reports. EU constantly requires from Kosovo institutions to take measures in preventing threats against journalists. Progress reports on Kosovo recall that media freedom is guaranteed by law and call for greater efforts on the ground, such as the investigation and prosecution of physical attacks against journalists, as well as amending the Criminal Code provisions

¹² Hahn, JOHANNES, MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, Brussel, may 2015 (<http://politiko.net/ep-content/uploads/2015/05/Letra.pdf>)

¹³Kushtetuta e Republikës së Kosovës, Neni 42 Liria e Medieve, 2008, 13

regarding criminal responsibility of media in protecting their sources.¹⁴

Conclusions

Journalism in Kosovo is in poor condition, due to the restriction of freedom of many journalists working in different media. Results of this research show that journalists are limited and influenced by many factors. Over 50% say that they have a dilemma whether to continue the profession of journalism, because they feel vulnerable to pressure and threats.

I can mention that the journalists of an editorial magazine did not respond to any questionnaire of this research. It makes me doubt that they could have the problems with the owners. This daily newspaper has not exclusive things, except daily stories and interviews ordered by their superiors.

There is a danger that the state of journalism and reporting can deteriorate further due to the unfavourable position of journalists. In Kosovo, there are many distinguished journalists and they are skilled in their profession. Many of them have won international awards in the biggest competitions of the press worldwide. But constant discouragement and pressure makes them and young journalists not to deal with real journalism or investigative journalism which is key in this profession.

Recommendations

Institutions and media organizations should urgently assess and consider the level of pressure that journalists are exposed to, whether in public or private media.

I consider with great interest the reactions of the reporters for the pressure on them at work, because currently over 38% of respondents say they are afraid to lose their jobs if they do not accept interference

¹⁴ European Commission, Kosovo, 2014 Progress Report, 2014, Brussels, 24

by the superiors of the media where they work, or even from the external factors.

Media leaders should seek more alternative financing opportunities in order not to be influenced by politics, or people and interest groups.

It necessary creating the space for independent journalists and combating the phenomenon of influence from the others, becoming a long-term strategy by the Kosovo institutions.

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