**The suppression of media freedom stifles any other progress in society**

***By: Sanja Škuletić-Malagić***

The media is a mirror of society, and the state of media freedom is a benchmark, actually the real image of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in one country. Because, the media are the ones who promote, monitor and warn about cases of human rights violations, and also often journalists themselves are victims of human rights violations.

It is not without reason that freedom of expression, which also guarantees freedom of the media, is one of the oldest human rights protected by several international declarations and resolutions, but also by the highest legal act of our country - the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina[[1]](#footnote-1).

After World War II, tremendous efforts were made internationally, especially in Europe, to thwart the re-emergence of totalitarian regimes and dictatorships. Such action has resulted in numerous declarations, resolutions, pacts ... as well as an extremely complicated and complex system of human rights protection.

**Good theory and bad practice**

Theoretically, human rights have been put on the pedestal of the priorities of Europe and the world, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose Constitution has incorporated 16 international documents guaranteeing human rights, which makes them supreme over all laws in our country.

Unfortunately, not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region, but also in the world, there is an obvious, and seemingly insurmountable, gap between the normative and the proclaimed on the one hand and practice, in the sense of applying the adopted norms, on the other hand.

Experienced human rights defenders emphasize that the fight for human rights is actually a fight not for our being better off, but for better off future generations.

The degree of respect for human rights is rightly regarded by many as a measure of civilizing processes in a society, although full implementation of human rights is considered as a utopia in far more socially and economically developed countries than ours.

But there is irrefutable evidence that respect for media freedom has a direct bearing on the orderliness of states. This was also pointed out by British Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt at a Global Press Freedom Conference in London in July. He cited that of the 10 "cleanest countries in the world, as ranked by Transparency International, seven are also in the top 10 of the World Media Freedom Index. Meanwhile, of the 10 most corrupt countries, four appear in the bottom 10 for media freedom."[[2]](#footnote-2)

The suppression of human rights, through the suppression of media freedom, stifles every other progress. In today's world, we are witnessing a series of examples that prove that the suppression of media freedom gives a chance to undemocratic autocratic systems dominated by closed centres of power with little or no citizen influence. Such systems go with nepotism, corruption, and cover themselves with propaganda through controlled media.

Hunt stressed that “the strongest safeguard against the dark side of power is accountability and scrutiny – and few institutions fulfil that role more effectively than a free media.”

It is important to reject the generalization and observation of any profession looked at through the prism of bad experiences and to accept that unethicality and unprofessionalism should never justify attacks or threats.

**The collapse of media freedom in BiH**

The Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees has no dilemma that professional media are natural allies, on the same mission and task of promoting human rights, affirming the principles and values of equality, tolerance and non-discrimination, educating citizens, encouraging change… Because freedom of expression is a catalyst for all other human rights and the professional media are one of the pillars of democracy and a key factor in promoting and respecting human rights in BiH.

Aware of their role and the need to create a partnership with the professional media, the Ministry has ensured the participation of more than 60 media outlets from across the country in drafting the first Report of the BiH Council of Ministers on the Freedom of Speech and the Media Freedom Situation in BiH[[3]](#footnote-3). The report was adopted by the Council of Ministers and both houses of the BiH Parliamentary Assembly and formed the basis for a thematic session in the State Parliament.

It was pointed out that the attacks, violence and intimidation of journalists were not adequately punished. Among the proposals for additional measures for the protection of journalists was that an assault on journalist be criminalised as a separate criminal offense or as a more severe form of criminal offense defined as an assault on an official person in the exercise of official duty.

Apart from the need to create more effective mechanisms for a safer environment for journalists' work, also the need for more journalistic unity and solidarity to improve the quality of journalism and the respect of professional standards and codes of ethics, was emphasized.

It was identified that illegal internet portals, non-transparency of media ownership, hate speech, pressures on the media, economic dependence are only some of the problems that the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina encounter in their work. Report states that "political pressures on all three public broadcast services contribute to giving priority to nationalistic and political interests over the public interest and call into question the role of public broadcast services as independent and professional media."

The European Commission’s progress reports[[4]](#footnote-4) note that political and financial pressures on the media continue to prevail in BiH and also point out the need to adopt regulations in the field of ownership transparency in online media as well as advertising in the media.

The Report of the Reporters Without Borders [[5]](#footnote-5)(2019) points out that Bosnia and Herzegovina is enfolded in a polarized political climate marked with constant verbal attacks and nationalistic rhetorics. According to the Reporters without Borders, Bosnia and Herzegovina is now ranked 62rd out of 180 countries by the Media Freedom Index. A regression is best illustrated by the fact that 15 years ago we were ranked on the high 21st place.

Reporters Without Borders have pointed out that media editorial decisions reflect ethnic divisions and hate speech, journalists are exposed to attacks and poor working conditions with generally low salaries "while lawsuits for defamation or insult of honour and dignity have become tools of politicians who want to intimidate journalists and deter them from researching some topics".

The focus of the Reporters was Banja Luka, where they cite an example when reporting of the protests related to the death of David Dragicevic was prevented, saying that "the authorities restricted both the freedom to assembly and the coverage of the demonstrations."

The media market, especially in the domain of the unregulated area of online media, has become relentless - only the fastest and most appealing to the general public are winning. In such an environment, the sovereign rulers are sensationalism, a lack of professionalism that is reflected in a sea of unverified information, false news, hate speech, promotion of morally questionable social values...

This is also pointed out by ethics professor Milenko Perovic, who states in his work “Ethics of the Media”[[6]](#footnote-6) that the Internet brings a "nightmare of immorality" and that Internet communication enables everyone to become a media worker, which calls into question the "mechanisms of legal and moral oversight of content that exist in classic media ”.

All this is only part of the problem in the field of media freedom, which contributes to the suppression of the professional media and the degradation of the honorable profession of journalists. Ignoring this issue and the apparent lack of unity and journalistic solidarity, which is crucial in the fight for media freedom, has led to a staying-alive-is-only-important attitude.

The question is until when this state will be sustainable. In this context, the results of a survey conducted by the BH Journalists Association and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation on May 3 - World Freedom of the Media, which show that as much as 27 percent of respondents in the RS and 17 percent in the FBiH justify violence or attacks on journalists, are worrying[[7]](#footnote-7). This is 14 percent more than last year's results.

The situation is even worse when one considers that only 24 per cent of attacks reported through the help line for journalists are resolved through the justice system in favour of journalists. Such results are alarming, and unless adequate measures are taken, attacks on journalists will become socially acceptable. But it will not stop there.

**Unpunished violence against journalists**

Last year, on the occasion of the International Day to End Impunity of Crimes against Journalists, UNESCO announced that, from 2006 to 2017, 1,009 people working in journalism were killed worldwide, while 90 per cent accused of violence against journalists went unpunished[[8]](#footnote-8).

OSCE Media Freedom Representative Harlem Desir recently highlighted the need to prosecute those responsible for crimes against journalists.

- Around 400 journalists have been killed in the OSCE region in the past 25 years. Less than 15% of these murders have been solved, said Desir and stressed that „the failure to prosecute can create an environment of impunity for those who might attack journalists, and breed further violence.“[[9]](#footnote-9)

And that means attacking the freedom of us all, not just journalists, but society as a whole. Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, warned in a timely manner, stating that: “Whoever would overthrow the liberty of a nation must begin by subduing the freeness of speech.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

That is why the warnings heard from all sides should be taken very seriously while not only fellow journalists are alive but also civilized democratic society.

***(The author is Information Officer at Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of BiH and a former journalist; This article was created as part of a project implemented by the BH Journalists Association and the German Embassy in BiH)***

1. Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina; <https://www.parlament.ba/data/dokumenti/pdf/vazniji-propisi/Ustav%20BiH%20-%20B.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Speech of Jeremy Hunt on Global Press Freedom Conference, July 11, 2019; London; <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/media-freedom-and-journalists-under-threat-foreign-secretarys-speech> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Report of the BiH Council of Ministers on the Freedom of Speech and the Media Freedom Situation in BiH, 118th session of Council of Ministers, October 19, 2017; [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Key findings of the 2018 Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_18_3408> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Report of the Reporters Without Borders for 2019; <https://rsf.org/en/bosnia-herzegovina> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Ethics of the Media”, Milenko Perovic; Page 142; [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A survey conducted by the BH Journalists Association and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation; <https://bhnovinari.ba/bs/2019/05/02/cak-21-posto-gradjana-bih-opravdava-nasilje-nad-novinarima/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. UNESCO presentation on Regional seminar: “Strengthening regional cooperation to end impunity for crimes and attacks against journalists in the Arab world”; Beirut, Lebanon; November 2018 <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/idei_concept_note_beirut_18_05_2018.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Harlem Desire, OSCE Media Freedom Representative, For International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists OSCE Representative, Vienna, October 2019; <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/437516> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Speech of Benjamin Franklin, Printed in The New-England Courant, July 9, 1722; <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-01-02-0015> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)