

North Macedonia

IGOR MICEVSKI

INTRODUCTION

The 2024 general elections brought about a stable majority in Parliament, led by the center-right VMRO-DPMNE. The party came to power for the first time since 2016 when it lost power amid popular disapproval of its authoritarian method of governance and the systemic corruption it generated. Media capture and radical clientelisation of journalists across media sectors were defining features of the pre-2016 political arrangement. The last electoral outcome therefore – while crystallizing the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia's failure to achieve lasting political consolidation, brought back uncertainties concerning the future path of the government returnee. This concern is raised especially because the country's disrupted efforts to start EU accession negotiations have traditionally had visible consequences on its political, economic and social stability.

Important in the 1990s, the press sector has rapidly declined in recent years, since it failed to successfully migrate to digital platforms. The landscape has been overtaken by the numerous, fragmented and click-oriented digital media service providers defined by poor-quality output. Traditionally in the past three decades audiovisual media have had the largest audience and market share, and they still have the strongest standing which makes them more prone to politico-corporate influences.

These characteristics of the media system have clear consequences for the journalistic cultures in North Macedonia. The fall of print media has brought about a decline in analytical and investigative journalism; the fragmentation of audiovisual and digital native media has dispersed the well-trained journalists across many different media organizations disabling the construction of newsroom dynamics that would foster higher professional standards; the disorderly media landscape has favored sensationalist, short and poorly written journalistic genres; the overall socio-political concentration in the capital city has devastated local journalism and so on. Within this landscape, the few existing not-for-profit digital native media are an exception as they manage to construct and maintain newsroom environments where higher professional standards and knowledge may thrive.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

The survey sample is representative for gender and distribution across media sectors. To determine the size and structure of the population – given the absence of prior estimates – we conducted a census across all media sectors. North Macedonia has 580 individuals working in current affair journalism – a sample size of 232 was derived corresponding to a $\pm 5\%$ margin of error). The sample reflects the gender structure – 50% of the respondents were women. The average age of the respondents is 44.0 years (Median = 43; SD = 11.1). Majority of the population is well educated: 75.4% hold a bachelor's degree, and 12.1% hold a master's degree. Notably, 9.1% of the population consists of university dropouts. Most of this population had begun working as journalists during their studies and did not complete formal higher education while remaining in the profession. In addition – 81% have completed formal training in journalism and 64.9% have gone through professional apprenticeship.

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

An important feature of the journalism landscape is the high concentration of journalists working in the capital city – 81,5% are located in the capital and 18,5% in smaller towns or rural areas. Furthermore, 82.3% of journalists are employed by national level media. The fragmented and financially unsustainable local and regional media sectors employ only 17.2% of the population. These figures indicate viability and quality issues for local journalism and problems related to the resilience of local public spheres.

Public Service Media employ 27.6% of the population while private media a total of 61.2%. The not-for-profit media sector is slowly but steadily rising – though still greatly dependent on foreign donors it employs 6.9% of journalists. For 52.2% of journalists, the main employer is a television organization. Radio stations are primary employers for 14,7% while 22.4% primarily work for digital native media.

The total income of most journalists comes solely from journalism related work – 86.5%. The rest, apart from journalism, earn additional income from education – 20.7%, corporate communication – 17.2%, advertising 13.8%, or work for government agencies – 6.9%. The poor income level is the primary problem for most journalists – 22.3% earn a salary on the level or just above the national average (651-812 euros); an additional 69.9% earn a salary up to the national average (this figure includes the 28.8% earning a salary close to the minimum wage and 2.6% earning a salary up to the minimum wage).

On average Macedonian journalists have 19.1 years of professional experience (Median = 19; SD = 9.9); 75.0% have signed a full-time permanent contract and 15.5% have a fulltime fixed term contract. On average, journalists work 40.2 hours per week (Median = 40; SD = 6.0; for those in full-time employment); 60.8% have reported that they often or very often experience work related stress – feeling of work-related stress is more prevalent in women (69.8%) than in men (60.8%). 72.0% are members of a Union.

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

The country's journalists, as seen on Table 1, most often experience demeaning or hateful speech directed at them (15.1%), public discrediting of their professional work (10.3%) and workplace bullying (6.0%). "State sponsored threats" – widely present until 2017 – are at present less pronounced. Still 2.6% of the respondents have reported that they believe to have been subject to surveillance. As suggested in Table 2, journalists' perception that offences against colleagues are not sanctioned is overwhelming (92.2% believe so). The figures suggest that 11.2% of journalists are worried of losing their job. It is however noteworthy that there is a statistically significant relationship between this concern and the type of media these journalists come from – journalists working for the Public Service Media are less likely to fear job loss (4.7%) than journalists working for private media (14.7%).

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	232	5.2%	9.9%	24.1%	16.8%	44.0%
Public discrediting of your work	232	3.0%	7.3%	16.8%	17.7%	55.2%
Surveillance	232	0.4%	2.2%	7.0%	7.0%	83.3%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	232	1.3%	1.3%	3.4%	9.5%	84.5%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	232	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.4%	99.1%
Legal actions against you because of your work	232	0.4%	1.3%	2.6%	3.9%	91.8%
Stalking	232	0.0%	0.4%	4.7%	3.4%	91.4%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	232	0.9%	3.4%	12.5%	9.9%	73.3%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	232	0.0%	0.0%	0.9%	1.3%	97.8%
Other physical attacks	232	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%	3.9%	94.0%
Coercion	232	0.0%	0.4%	1.3%	2.6%	95.7%
Questioning of your personal morality	232	1.3%	2.6%	9.1%	11.2%	75.9%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	232	0.4%	0.4%	3.0%	5.2%	90.9%
Others disseminating your personal information	232	0.4%	0.9%	3.0%	3.9%	91.8%
Workplace bullying	232	1.7%	4.3%	6.9%	9.9%	77.2%
Abductions	232	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.9%	99.1%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	232	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%	0.9%	97.8%
Intimidation that targets family	232	0.0%	0.4%	3.9%	4.7%	90.9%

Question: "In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?"

TABLE 2. WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Worried about losing job in journalism within the next 12 months	232	11.2%	1.84	1.17
Concerned about physical well-being	232	26.7%	2.42	1.43
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	232	34.6%	2.75	1.46
Concerned that those who harm journalists in N. Macedonia go unpunished	232	92.2%	4.58	0.77

Question: "Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ROLES

The data presented in Table 3 suggests that both the traditionally acclaimed and the interventionist, activism-oriented roles of journalism are seen as preferred professional characteristics. The country's polarized media landscape, as elsewhere in the world, is manifested in junctures of political crises. It is therefore noteworthy that at these junctures there is a more pronounced incongruence between the expressed preferred roles by respondents and the actual media content.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	231	91.8%	4.68	0.65
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	232	93.1%	4.68	0.67
Shine a light on society's problems	232	97.8%	4.86	0.41
Motivate people to participate in politics	215	42.3%	3.15	1.40
Provide analysis of current affairs	232	95.7%	4.75	0.60
Let people express their views	232	90.1%	4.59	0.73
Provide information people need to form political opinion	213	65.7%	3.85	1.38
Advocate for social change	231	91.8%	4.67	0.67
Influence public opinion	232	91.4%	4.57	0.78
Set the political agenda	203	18.7%	2.16	1.35
Promote peace and tolerance	232	97.0%	4.84	0.48
Educate the audience	232	99.6%	4.85	0.42
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	232	92.7%	4.61	0.67
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	232	94.8%	4.70	0.72
Support national development	232	93.1%	4.67	0.64
Support government policy	200	5.5%	1.74	1.01
Convey a positive image of political leaders	206	6.3%	1.47	0.96
Provide entertainment and relaxation	230	51.3%	3.46	1.38
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	231	50.4%	3.43	1.45
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	230	58.7%	3.57	1.38
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	230	53.5%	3.60	1.30
Support efforts to protect public health	232	96.1%	4.69	0.62
Counteract disinformation	232	97.4%	4.88	0.52
Discuss future implications of current events	231	89.2%	4.53	0.77

Question: "Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work." (Scale: 5 = Extremely important; 4 = Very important; 3 = Moderately important; 2 = Slightly important; 1 = Not at all important.)

JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

There is an overwhelming consensus among journalists on the importance of abiding by professional standards, regardless of situational circumstances (98.7%). However, a little over two thirds of the respondents (71.1%) also agree that what is ethical is rooted in circumstance-specific weighing professional standards (Table 4). The high level of agreement on both statements has analytical merit as it recognizes that many of the established professional standards incorporate exceptions to the rigidly understood rule – e.g. Articles 4, 5, 7 & 9 of the Code of Ethics of Macedonia contain circumstance-specific exceptions weighed against what is considered to be “the public interest”. Balancing against the public interest requires personal judgement on what constitutes that interest. Yet less trust is placed in approaches to ethical reporting that relies on personal judgement or situational assessments. This may indicate difference in the definition of what is personal judgement between respondents – many may attach “subjective arbitrariness” to the concept of judgement. Table 5 indicates that when judging on concrete situations, there is less agreement among journalists on what is the limit of ethical behavior.

TABLE 4. ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment	232	98.7%	4.85	0.39
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	232	71.1%	3.83	1.39
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	232	55.6%	3.36	1.61
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	232	40.9%	2.84	1.73

Questions: “The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree.” / “Using the same scale, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following beliefs.” (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

TABLE 5 JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROVERSIAL REPORTING METHODS

	N	Always justified	Justified on occasion
Claiming to be somebody else	232	0.4%	33.8%
Using hidden recording devices	230	0.9%	50.9%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	227	3.1%	50.2%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	228	2.2%	44.3%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	229	1.3%	18.3%
Paying people for confidential information	227	1.8%	19.8%
Accepting money from sources	226	0%	4.4%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	227	0%	10.6%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	229	3.5%	15.3%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	230	0%	7.4%

Question: “The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree.” (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

Journalists’ general perception concerning the overall media freedom is far grimmer than the reported personal professional freedom. Relatively high percentage of respondents have reported that they have great deal or complete freedom in selecting their own news stories (68,5%) and in choosing the aspects of the stories that should be emphasized (75.4%), while relatively low percentage have claimed that there is a great deal or complete overall media freedom in the country. Men have reported greater freedom in story selection (77.6%) than women (59.5%). Men also have reported more freedom in deciding which aspect of the story to emphasize (81.0%) than women (69.8%).

TABLE 6. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	232	68.5%	4.05	0.93
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	232	75.4%	4.10	0.93
Media freedom in North Macedonia	232	18.1%	2.81	0.89

(Scale: 5 = Complete freedom; 4 = A great deal of freedom; 3 = Some freedom; 2 = Little freedom; 1 = No freedom at all.)

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

In the hierarchy of factors influencing content production – most respondents indicated journalism ethics (87.4%), level of freedom in accessing information (80.4%) and media laws and regulations (71.2%), followed by the availability of news-gathering resources (69.9%) and personal values (68.1%), to be most influential enabling/constraining factors. Colleagues in other media, the police, religious groups and organized crime groups are at the bottom of the list. North Macedonia's socio-political arrangement is intertwined with a web of complex informalities fostering clientelistic ties, which is why the fact that the influence of self-censorship (15.8%), government officials (12.4%), and the politicians (12.3%) is in the lower area of the list.

TABLE 7. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	231	34.2%	2.94	1.25
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	228	50.9%	3.48	1.17
The business managers of the news organization	230	41.3%	3.01	1.38
The owners of the news organization	227	32.2%	2.68	1.43
Editorial policy	229	51.5%	3.42	1.30
Advertising considerations	224	24.1%	2.37	1.48
Profit expectations	225	24.9%	2.28	1.37
Audience research and data	229	54.1%	3.50	1.42
Availability of news-gathering resources	229	69.9%	3.96	1.12
Time limits	228	58.3%	3.62	1.29
Journalism ethics	222	87.4%	4.47	0.88
Self-censorship	222	15.8%	2.22	1.24
Personal values and beliefs	229	68.1%	3.92	1.26
Colleagues in other media	229	9.6%	2.07	1.07
Friends, acquaintances and family	229	15.3%	2.26	1.25
Feedback from the audience	229	52.0%	3.48	1.33
Competing news organizations	229	31.9%	2.77	1.41
Media laws and regulation	229	71.2%	4.07	1.10
Access to information	224	80.4%	4.26	0.93
Government censorship	210	17.6%	2.17	1.35
Government officials	210	12.4%	1.86	1.23
Politicians	211	12.3%	1.87	1.23
Business people	211	13.3%	1.84	1.24
Public relations	212	13.2%	1.98	1.22
Relationships with news sources	216	28.2%	2.57	1.39
Police	211	9.0%	1.72	1.08
Issue advocacy groups	215	12.1%	2.02	1.19
Scientists or health experts	215	32.1%	2.57	1.46
Religious groups and institutions	212	7.5%	1.68	1.08
Organized crime and criminal groups	209	6.7%	1.50	1.02

Question: "Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist." (Scale: 5 = Extremely influential; 4 = Very influential; 3 = Moderately influential; 2 = Slightly influential; 1 = Not at all influential.)