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PAROCHIAL JOURNALISM –  
DO MEDIA HELP PEOPLE TO LOOK  
BEYOND THE NATIONAL BORDERS?



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## South-East European Partnership for Media Development

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## INTRODUCTION

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False news is the only direct link between the American presidential elections and Macedonia. The headlines such as “The Pope endorsed Donald Trump for President”, “Hillary Clinton will be arrested on paedophilia charges”, “Michelle Obama is a man” and much more absurd news was created by false websites from the small Macedonian town Veles, mostly by anonymous teenagers. With thousands of shares on the social media, it flooded mostly the American media, but it was also published by the Macedonian media, mostly portals, without checking the facts. One 16 year old owner of such a website stated for the British Channel 4 that his main motive was profit, but he also realised that: “People are hungry for news”.

The public in Macedonia is hungry for news on the presidential elections in the USA and their geopolitical impact; it received sketchy information that is often not properly framed, and there was no thorough analysis in the domestic media. Stories taken over from the American and other foreign media were published without being contextualised for the domestic public. Such articles, as well as all other news items on foreign policy, unless it is a very big event, are usually aired at the end of the TV news or published on the last pages of the newspapers, while there is no specialised foreign policy show in the traditional media.

International reporting is practically omitted or minimised in the media which leaves space for sketchy information, as well as speculations and manipulations.

## SKETCHY INFORMATION

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The US presidential elections are the best example in this respect. “The media covered the American election campaign at the level of a phenomenon rather than offering a serious overview of what was promised by the candidates. Trump’s announcement for US isolationism, turning towards itself and becoming dissolved of some of its planetary “duties” - such as the promotion of the democracy - remain at the level of ordinary information. It is his women and tax related scandals that have enjoyed attention. While there was a failure to convey Trump’s aspirations, there was also a failure to convey the details of Hillary Clinton’s programme or her vision pertaining to the future of America. In principle, all information was sketchy, in line with the fact that in Macedonia there are sketchy reports regarding all worldwide events, unless a direct correlation can be made with the interests of a local party, where upon all of a sudden a certain ‘analysis’ appears”, says Ljupco Popovski, foreign policy editor at *Utrinski Vesnik*<sup>1</sup>.

For many years back, the Macedonian media have not had any reporters abroad, with the exception of the national television, whose rating is low and their reports go unnoticed. Three television stations sent special reporters several days before the voting, as well as one television station that had a reporter as a participant in the programme financed by the US Embassy in Skopje. These television teams portrayed only moments of the elections atmosphere in New York and on Election Day. This is considered an exception, because the Macedonian media very rarely finance news reports from abroad, even in the case of the neighbouring countries which are only a few hours away from Skopje.

The political analyst and former OSCE Ambassador, Arsim Zekolli, estimated that the Macedonian media mainly followed the dominating statements in the US media, with all their accompanying inclinations and features. “In my opinion, this is the reason for, what I dare to call, the one-dimensional coverage of the elections, wherein the information was mainly based on daily-political events related to the two candidates, with very little consideration of the social, cultural and spiritual dynamics in the background, which in the end determined the final outcome. The domestic media missed the opportunity for a thorough analysis of the major socio-cultural upheaval taking place in the western world, its roots and future development”, said Zekolli.<sup>2</sup>

The reason for such media coverage lies also in the absence of news analysts who report on major geo-strategic events, considers Aleksandar Comovski, a journalist with many years of experience: “A thesis is being developed that Macedonia is a small country incapable of making an impact, while on the other hand, there is a general tendency to push a topical issue stating that Macedonia is at the crossroads of the strategic and tectonic movements that might occur, from the Balkans, from

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1 Interview with Ljupco Popovski, Editor in Utrinskivesnik daily, November 20 2016, Skopje.

2 Interview with Arsim Zekoli, political analyst, former Macedonian ambassador at OSCE, November 27 2016, Skopje.

the intersection of the Russian influence from old Yalta to the “green transversal”.<sup>3</sup>

News analysts should open such issues unless they are under the influence of the players in the domestic foreign policy. There is a lack of a distance of the journalists from any governmental foreign policy unless it is based upon the stereotypes such as EU, NATO and the name, concludes Comovski.

The Macedonian politicians themselves neither made any analyses whatsoever nor stated their own position regarding the US elections. Being stuck in their own serious political crisis for two years now, they have been preparing for the early elections. It is a poor excuse having regard to the fact that foreign policy constitutes an articulation of the state priorities at an international level, which are formed through a correlation of the obstacles and limitations, which the country and its national interests face to face. However, all politicians, without any exceptions, estimated that foreign policy will not bring them any votes at the elections, so they deliberately omitted it. For years now, there have been no debates on the televisions in Macedonia, a condition imposed by the ruling parties which reject any media encounters with their political rivals. How critical is the condition has also been indicated by the fact that there was no political debate of the main political players on the crisis of migrants either, one of the most important foreign policy issues, in which Macedonia had an exceptionally important role.

## TRUMP AND CLINTON SUPPORTERS

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This division was reflected both in the block division between the pro-government and the neutrally critical televisions, as well as in the coverage of the US elections.

The usual belief is that the outcome in the USA will determine the outcome of the Macedonian elections and the aftermath. However, just like in many other spheres, things are becoming simplified and there was a cheering atmosphere for the US elections as if they were a football match.

These cheering positions were dominant in a part of the media close to the right-wing Government which favoured Trump and often criticised the US media for supporting one of the candidates, in the efforts to identify the problematic media sphere in Macedonia and to find a justification for their own bias in the editing policy. The Macedonian media whose objective is to attack the opposition, the civic organizations, the media that criticize the Government, as well as the western countries which they blame for interfering with the country's internal affairs, used the US elections to once again accuse Soros of backing up not only the ones that they attack on a daily basis, but also of having a much grimmer role in the US elections. Articles and TV reports have been published that proved that “the credibility of the American democracy, legal order and state policy is being undermined”. They also urged for people to support Trump, hoping that by electing him the obsolescence of the US democratic model will be demonstrated and that it would be proven that the right-wing parties were right to seek a new one. The analysts have also discerned a Russian impact in these pro-government media, after the opening of several Russian portals and establishing correspondents of Russian media, while in the recent years also Russian capital started entering Macedonia.

“A trend has appeared in our country for the right-wing party to favour Trump and the left-wing party to favour Hillary, even though we are discussing values that are impossible to compare, since the US left-wing party actually equals the European right-wing party. The fact that the anti-American citizens in our country favour the Republican candidate is motivated by the identification with his pro-Russian positions, which echoed significantly throughout the campaign”, said Nano Ruzin, former Ambassador and a former presidential candidate himself.<sup>4</sup>

Some analysts consider that not only in Macedonia, but also in several Balkan countries, leaders have “identified” themselves with Trump's political style and that electing him is sufficient encouragement for the populists in the region who have recognized a powerful ally in him in terms of style.

Very few comments have appeared in the other media. The most radical was the thesis that Trump's victory is an introduction to another cold war, with consequences which are just shy of catastrophic for Macedonia and for the world. The political

3 Interview with Aleksandar Chomovski, Host of political TV show Top Tema at national broadcaster TV Telma, December 12 2016, Skopje.

4 Interview with Nano Ruzin, Professor of political and social sciences, Former Macedonian Ambassador to NATO, November 6, 2016, Skopje.

communication expert Petar Arsovski estimated that the sole thesis worth analyzing is “whether Trump’s victory would mean a cessation of the US policy applied thus far in terms of democracy export”. According to Arsovski, it would most probably be an introduction into a new era: an agreed division between the USA and Russia, without too much attention being paid to the internal condition of the countries.

Even though, according to the worldwide research conducted by Gallup<sup>5</sup>, a prevailing majority of the Macedonians would vote for Hillary, still in the media and the social networks more space has been left for the events related to Trump.

The foreign policy editor Popovski explained this by the local dissatisfaction with the political elites in Europe and the USA, “especially due to the dispute with the name, wherein subconsciously many people think that a new person in the White House could bring a dramatic turn of events to our benefit”.

“Of course, it is an illusion, but propaganda thrives the most on illusions. Regardless of the fact that suddenly such a great number of Trump fans appeared here, the Macedonian citizens would have preferred a safe reliability (Clinton) which they could curse or label as historic injustice, rather than not knowing at all what to expect from the billionaire’s administration, whose future plans are known to no one. It is very realistic that, by means of a single political step which might leave an impression here of an inclination to the Greeks, orchestrated hate speech and manipulation of facts could be triggered”, Popovski said.

According to Zekolli, the division between pro and con camps for Clinton and Trump, projected upon the local left-wing and right-wing sentiments was also due to the established scheme of ethnical differences in the support for Clinton by the Albanians, and the support for Trump by the Macedonians.

## WHO MAKES THE STRONGEST IMPACT – JOURNALISTS OR ANALYSTS?

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Who could be considered an opinion maker on foreign policy in Macedonia, also regarding the American presidential elections? The comments that have appeared, except for the ones aired by foreign media, were primarily made by the journalists covering these issues. They disagree that they are the ones to be considered opinion makers.

According to Ljupco Popovski, the chiefs of Macedonian diplomacy are certainly not opinion makers, whom he describes as “extremely bureaucratic, completely void of ideas, charisma and power to make an impact on the public”; thence, their activity is considered insignificant, since they do not have the power to create anything.<sup>6</sup>

“This amateur world also comprises the analysts dealing with the world and our foreign policy. Their theories are so superficial and biased that they are not even worth listening to. The same refers to the non-governmental activists. Certainly, there are always exceptions in every sphere, including this one. But sometimes it seems astonishing how just a few journalists can know much more, think much deeper and analyze in much broader terms than the ones who get paid and hold positions precisely for that kind of work. In the realm of the Macedonian superficiality, foreign policy is among the dullest spheres and no one even bothers to give it an interesting hint”, Popovski estimated.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike him, Aleksandar Comovski gave priority to the former diplomats as opinion makers. “The political analysts are the most influential ones since they cover current processes, the perspective geo-strategic development and are capable of a background assessment in terms of continuity or discontinuity. For the politicians, foreign policy does not constitute an issue of interest that brings votes; on the contrary, it leads to losing votes because in Macedonia, even after 25 years, there are still pending and unresolved relations with the neighbours, while the pillar of foreign policy is primarily the relation with the neighbours”, Comovski said.<sup>8</sup>

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5 Gallup International, Global Poll on the American Election, WIN Gallup International, 2016. Available at: [http://www.wingia.com/web/files/richeitor/filemanager/WINGIA\\_Global\\_Poll\\_on\\_US\\_Election\\_-\\_FINALIZED\\_Revised\\_Global\\_Press\\_Release.pdf](http://www.wingia.com/web/files/richeitor/filemanager/WINGIA_Global_Poll_on_US_Election_-_FINALIZED_Revised_Global_Press_Release.pdf).

6 Interview with Ljupco Popovski, editor of Utrinskivesnik daily, November 20 2016, Skopje.

7 Ibid.

8 Interview with Aleksandar Chomovski, Host of political TV show Top Tema at the national broadcaster TV Telma, December 12 2016, Skopje.

## INFORMATION REVOLUTION ON FACEBOOK AND TWITTER

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The presidential elections in USA and the conditions in Macedonia overlapped in yet another segment, in addition to the block division and bias with some of the traditional media. It is the domination of the social networks in the information regarding the US presidential elections.

The analyst Arsim Zekolli concludes that it means that the citizens have less and less confidence in the traditional media. However, the negative consequence is that more and more people sharing the same line of thinking get connected on the social networks, where everything is allowed.

“In a situation when curiosity is based on the need to find information that confirms your inclination and prejudice in advance, space is created for the proliferation of false information, semi-truths, spinning, all the way to verbal aggression against the opponent. I even think that from that perspective we are quite on the same level with the US public, due to a series of similarities in our realities, problems and political events. Yet, the most dangerous thing both here and in the USA, which is going to result in severe consequences, is the promotion of a distorted line of thinking according to which at a time of electoral campaigns almost everything is allowed - racism, chauvinism, misogyny, insults, hate speech- without any or with only minor consequences”, Zekolli said.<sup>9</sup>

Even though he estimated that in our case it is reflected on the already built balance between the classic media which are controlled by the parties, the state institutions and the commerce on the one hand, and the social media in which the competition is better since it offers an opportunity for having clashing political arguments and individual analyses and stances, on the other hand. Therefore, Facebook and Twitter are so popular since in their free space there is zero tolerance for imaginary authorities and spinning propagandas which are still protected against open criticism in the classic media.

If we also take into consideration the huge supply of information from foreign media, it becomes clear that we have a situation of an absolute lack of sovereignty in terms of information, beyond the control of the usually applied methods. This trend is reminiscent of the liberal spirit explosion at the end of the sixties with the appearance of television, and then also with satellite coverage of events. Social networks appear to be the new age.

The political science expert Nano Ruzin thinks that on the social networks there are not only supporting teams, but also very serious debates: “They are creating a new political culture, young generations which are much more open to the developments worldwide, such as the US presidential elections. We are witnessing the birth of a new generation, a new world in which there is zero tolerance for violence, the myth of authorities is destroyed, while a critical way of thinking and new value system are being established.”<sup>10</sup> Both Ruzin and Zekolli concluded that the closed character and the inertness of the establishment in terms of these new phenomena only make it easier for the populists to dominate the advantages provided by them, at least for the time being.

The false websites from Veles mentioned at the beginning of this text also point to the flaws of the social networks and the lack of control in that sphere, where reading headlines, information without stating sources and their fast dispersion without verifying the facts ensure only sketchy information. Nevertheless, these are the dilemmas that have generally appeared in the world media sphere. No official investigation was launched in the Veles case.

In Macedonia, according to the latest market research conducted by the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, almost 75% of the citizens in 2015 obtained information regarding the domestic and the foreign policy from television, while the Internet is in the second position with 48%.<sup>11</sup> Thence, it is upon the television stations to adjust to the new demands on the market when it comes to providing information on the foreign policy developments. If they create a distance from the domestic foreign policy players who have been avoiding these issues, it is possible for them to have a much stronger impact on the public opinion, with deeper analyses, access to more sources of information and more frequent live reports. Furthermore, they should also adjust fast to the new trend and become multimedial, with developed Internet platforms and contents that will rapidly spread on the social networks.

9 Interview with Arsim Zekolli, political analyst, former Macedonian ambassador at OSCE, November 27 2016, Skopje.

10 Interview with Nano Ruzin, Professor of political and social sciences, Former Macedonian Ambassador to NATO, November 6, 2016, Skopje.

11 Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, Analiza na pazarotna audio i audiovizuelni medijumski uslugi 2015, Skopje, 2016, p. 9-10. Available at: [http://www.avmu.mk/images/Analiza\\_na\\_pazarot\\_na\\_audio\\_i\\_audiovizuelni\\_medijumski\\_uslugi\\_za\\_2015\\_godina.pdf](http://www.avmu.mk/images/Analiza_na_pazarot_na_audio_i_audiovizuelni_medijumski_uslugi_za_2015_godina.pdf).

On the other hand, the countries must put more efforts and resources to introduce and implement media literacy in all segments of the society, especially educating the audience. In this way the audience would be able to compare, critically assess and analyze the information it receives and thus better understand how and why some news was produced. The media literate public, ideally, would be the one that could differentiate between true and false, credible and propagandistic news; the literate public would be able to resist possible media manipulation that the centers of power sometimes use for fulfilling their own interest.

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#### **LIST OF INTERVIEWS:**

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