



PANEL DISCUSSION IN NIS: “MEDIA STRATEGY – WHAT’S NEXT?”

On November 25, 2011, ANEM organized the panel discussion titled “Media Strategy – What’s next?” in Nis Media Centre, where five representatives of media and journalists’ associations informed the public in the south of Serbia about stands of this media coalition on the adopted Media Strategy and its solutions, as well as on the further steps of these associations regarding the implementation of the said document. Speakers at the panel discussion were: *Sasa Mirkovic* (ANEM President), *Vukasin Obradovic*, (IJAS/NUNS President), *Petar Jeremic* (Chairman of JAS/UNS Executive Board), *Zuzana Serences* (member of the IJAV/NDNV Managing Board), and *Dejan Miladinovic* (Chairman of Local Press Managing Board). The panel discussion was attended by many participants, primarily journalists (Tanjug, Beta, FoNet, Blic, RTV Krusevac, Radio Beograd, RTV Pink, NIS TV and radio stations – RTV 5, NTV, TV Belle Amie, City Radio Nis), as well as representatives of journalists’ and media associations and civil sector.

The first to address the present was **Sasa Mirkovic** who said that the Media Strategy was not an ideal document, but it was the one the associations had fought for and thanks to that fight, the document included some substantial postulates important for media sector. He emphasized that, according to the associations, forming of regional public broadcasting services was the most disputable issue in the Strategy. He said that the initial idea was that regional public broadcasting service institutions were to be established in Belgrade, Nis, Novi Pazar, Kragujevac, Zajecar and Uzice, excluding Vojvodina; names of cities/towns were deleted from the Strategy at the last moment. He also said that there were reasonable expectations that the announced Media Strategy of Vojvodina would envisage few more regional public broadcasting service institutions (Pancevo and Subotica), while, according to unofficial information, there were some new political demands to propose two more cities/towns as locations of these institutions (Jagodina and Vranje). Mirkovic said that existence of such a large number of these institutions called the way of their financing into question, especially having in mind the current level of RTV-fee collection. As an additional problem, he mentioned the criteria for deciding who would perform the function of public service broadcasting, but also the question of imperiling the media market by these institutions, having in mind their possibility to broadcast commercials. Finally, he said that the media coalition would insist on consistent implementation of the Strategy Action Plan, without which this document would be a dead letter.

Vukasin Obradovic said that the consistent implementation of the Media Strategy might finally put an end to the great influence of the state and state organs on the media. He reminded that, during the whole process, the media coalition was insisting on the following: withdrawal of the state from the media, transparency of ownership, illegal concentration, exclusion of the financing of media from state budget and introducing the project financing instead of hitherto way of financing. He mentioned that the report of the Anti-Corruption Council illustrated why the Media Strategy was necessary for Serbia, and that Report, among other things, pointed out that the state had been controlling two thirds of the funds in the media sector. He emphasized that the media coalition

advocated for the state to take care of public interest in a different way, through project financing and with utter transparency of the process. Finally, he said that the value of the Media Strategy would depend on the success of adopting new laws and amending the old ones, and that there was a possibility that this reform process would be called into the question in case Serbia's candidacy for EU membership on December 9, 2011 be denied.

Petar Jeremic said that the Strategy was brought because the Government needed it as a precondition for the EU candidacy. In addition to that, he mentioned that implementation of the Strategy would depend on the next Government. He said that the media coalition would keep insisting on respect of deadlines envisaged by the Action Plan, as well as on ending the state aid to certain media as of January 1, 2012, which was one of conditions that Serbia had accepted by signing the Stabilization and Accession Agreement. He also mentioned the problem in the current way of media financing, as well as the need to finance public interest rather than a company, through transparent procedures independent from political influence.

Dejan Miladinovic elaborated on the need to support the local media and mentioned the hitherto efforts of the associations aimed at finding solutions by authorities to make project financing of media content from local budgets available. He said that the implementation of the Media Strategy was to enable such way of financing. As for the print media, he emphasized that the Strategy envisaged customs' tax exemptions for the printing material, which could decrease costs of print media.

Zuzana Serenčes said that there was no current systemic solution developed to ensure a secure future of informing in minority languages. She also said that the Strategy did not suggest any mechanism that would ensure such a future. She indicated the problem of the Strategy's failure to restrict right of minority national councils to be founders of the media, whereas the Law on National Councils of National Minorities provided for broad competence of minority national councils in relation to the media in which they elected administrative and supervisory structure. At that, the Law does not define the obligations of these councils in terms of information. She stressed that a great problem lied in ensuring editorial independence of these media. In addition to that, she said that the Strategy had missed an opportunity to limit the width or number of media in which the national councils had the founding rights, while the Action Plan should have provided for amendments to current law on national councils that would guarantee complete editorial independence of these media.

After the presentations, the panelists opened an active discussion on this topic, during which the present were providing their views and opinions on the adopted Media Strategy, as well as on the problems faced by the media at the local level. The representatives of the media that remained in state ownership, i.e. non-privatized media founded by local self-governments, spoke about the reasons for refusal of privatization as a solution for local broadcasters, noting that the private media were under stronger pressures and influences by politicians and people in power at local level. On the other hand, representatives of private media expressed doubt that the adopted Media Strategy would contribute to their better positioning and setting equal conditions on the media market, especially having in mind the Strategy's solution related to the creation of regional public services. At the end of the discussion, representatives of the media coalition reiterated that it was very important that the media associations, despite their mutual differences, teamed up on development of such an important document, because if it had not been the case, the question would have

been what kind of solutions in such a Strategy would have been offered. They stressed that they would closely monitor the implementation of the Strategy and its solutions and insist on the consistent implementation of the Strategy Action Plan.