

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/macedonia-disastrous-summer-for-macedonian-17-08-2011,40797.html>

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Europe & ex-USSR - Macedonia

Media mayhem

## Disastrous summer for Macedonian media, with TV station and three dailies closed

17 August 2011

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Reporters Without Borders is very worried about a steady decline in respect for press freedom in Macedonia since the start of the year. The closure of three national dailies, the withdrawal of the leading privately-owned TV station's licence and changes to the Broadcasting Council that facilitate government control have caused an upheaval in the media world that does not bode well for freedom of expression.

### Closure of three leading dailies and A1 TV

Reporters Without Borders deplors the 3 July closure of three dailies owned by the Macedonian media company *Plus Produkcija* and the fact that *A1*, a TV station owned by the same group, has been stripped of its broadcasting licence. *Vreme*, Macedonia's most widely-read newspaper, the Albanian-language daily *Koha e Re* and the tabloid *Špic* were all put in administration as a result of a tax investigation into *Plus Produkcija* owner Velija Ramkovski that began in December 2010.

An influential businessman and media baron, Ramkovski was an unconditional supporter and partner of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski's government from 2006 to 2008 but distanced himself in 2009. Thereafter, *Plus Produkcija* became the bugbear of the government, which found it hard to accept *A1*'s outspoken criticism.

A detachment of police special forces raided *A1*'s headquarters in November 2010 as part of an investigation into Ramkovski on suspicion of tax fraud, money laundering and organized crime. Ramkovski and 10 of his aides and associates were placed in pre-trial detention in June 2011. Their trial, dubbed the Spider's Web, began at the end of June but has been repeatedly adjourned since then.

After the launch of the investigation into Ramkovski and his arrest, the bank accounts of *Plus Produkcija* and *A1* were frozen. Despite the financial difficulties, the determination shown by the journalists and staff at the three newspapers and *A1* paid off and normal operations resumed after debts had been repaid (70,000 euros by *Plus Produkcija* and 2.4 million euros by *A1*).

But the four media had their accounts frozen again at the end of June when Macedonia's public treasury demanded the immediate settlement of unpaid taxes and social security contributions amounting to 1 million euros for *Plus Produkcija* and 9.5 million euros for *A1*. Although they appealed to an administrative court, they were ordered to settle these debts by 8 August.

The government originally said the investigation would not threaten *A1* but this is clearly no longer the case. In an 8 July press release, the government said: "The situation that the TV station *A1* is undergoing has a simple explanation, namely the legal action against its owner, who is the subject of judicial proceedings. Any attempt to stir up a controversy about irregularities in the institutional system would be to misinform the public, a practice for which *A1* is already well known."

"We are astonished by these upheavals in the media landscape," Reporters Without Borders said. "While it is clearly legitimate to combat money laundering and tax fraud, we are disturbed

by the decisions to place the same media group in administration twice in a row and the hasty closure of its newspapers before the outcome of its legal appeals.

“Journalists cannot be blamed for any misconduct by their media owners. A staggered debt payment schedule could and should have been negotiated to ensure the survival of these independent media. The government clearly seized the chance to silence some of the few media that criticize it.

“We also call on the government to act consistently in the *A1* case and to respect the law. The broadcast frequency *A1* had been using until 30 July was arbitrarily withdrawn by the Electronic Communications Agency (AEC) without the Broadcasting Council’s approval, violating article 55 of the broadcasting law and disregarding the council’s members. We warn the government not to let broadcast licences be rescinded arbitrarily. The council’s prerogatives must be scrupulously respected.”

### **Questionable reform of Broadcasting Council**

The government is meanwhile in the process of reforming the Broadcasting Council in such a way as to bring it under its control by increasing the number of its members from nine to 15. The six new members are to be named by the country’s president, the parliament’s anti-corruption commission and the Electronic Communications Agency – all of which are controlled by the ruling VMRO-DPMNE party.

The changes to the Broadcasting Council were rushed through parliament, which approved them in a vote on 18 July.

Reporters Without Borders condemns the reform of the Broadcasting Council and, in particular, the use of an emergency procedure to speed it through parliament. The changes to the council’s composition are far from minor and should have been the subject of a debate with media and civil society organizations.

There was no justification for such haste except to gain control of the Broadcasting Council which, in theory at least, will have to endorse the withdrawal of *A1*’s frequency. It is hard to believe that all this was just a coincidence. There is every reason for questioning the real goals being pursued by a government that seems bent on tightening its grip on the media.

### **State TV coup attempt**

Reporters Without Borders also condemns last week’s decision by the state TV broadcaster’s executive committee to fire its entire board of governors. According to the broadcasting law, each of the board’s seven members holds the post for a single five-year term that can be shortened only in exceptional circumstances that include personal choice, a prison sentence or a political appointment incompatible with continuing in the position.

According to the information available to Reporters Without Borders, none of these circumstances was cited by the executive committee. Only two of the board’s seven members were reaching the end of their term. The others had at least several months to serve and the newest member began his term of office just seven months ago. No attempt has so far been made to form a new board, and this is now blocking all management decisions.

The government seems to be acting in an utterly illegal manner, as it did with the Broadcasting Council. It is gradually gaining very direct control over both the regulatory bodies and the management of the state-owned media.

In an opinion piece for *Utrinski Vesnik* on 9 August, **Ace Dukovski**, one of the board’s members, described what is happening within the state TV broadcaster as an attempted coup. He said it was Slobodan Čašule, the recently-elected head of the executive committee, who had requested that the mandates of all the board’s members be rescinded. Čašule insists that he has respected the broadcasting law. But article 137 of this law says that, while the executive committee may exceptionally decide to change the length of the term of office of board member, it can only do so at the board’s suggestion.

### **Labour unions targeted**

Reporters Without Borders also deplores the arbitrary dismissal of journalists who are active labour union members, including **Tamara Čausidis**, the president of the Union of Journalists of Macedonia, who was fired from the privately-owned TV station *Alsati-M* on 9 July.

She told Reporters Without Borders that, before being dismissed, she had been subjected to threats and pressure to abandon her union activities and she had turned down various suggestions from her superiors that she should resign voluntarily. Even now, *Alsat-M* claims that she left by mutual consent and that her departure was confirmed by a "voluntary cancellation" agreement signed on 9 August.

"I never signed and never even saw this document," **Čausidis** said. "It is up to the police to find out how my signature was put on it." She said the use of agreements signed under pressure or in ignorance in order to fire journalists is on the increase in Macedonia. Such practices are widely used in the private sector and are tolerated by the government, which uses them itself.

"This is why I don't want to dispense with legal proceedings. It is crucial for me to win these legal proceedings, not just for myself but for all the other media and their employees. I don't know how long it may take, but I have no intention of dispensing with them."

**Tamara Grnčaroska**, another member of the union's board, worked for *Utrinski Vesnik*, a daily newspaper that is having financial difficulties and is in the process of restructuring. A demonstration was organized which led to the dismissal of five journalists, including **Grnčaroska**, for alleged misconduct.

"After the demonstration, I was fired for disobeying my editor and for lack of discipline," she said. "The dismissal procedure, the arbitration committee, none of this was respected." She added that, as someone specialized in covering foreign affairs, she has never been pressured in connection with her reporting.

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