

# NATIONAL STUDY

The crisis of local journalism  
in the V4 countries and the  
specific role of municipal  
newspapers in it



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## INTRODUCTION

The crisis of local journalism is nothing new, it is, to a large degree, a long-term global trend. In the USA for instance, one fourth of local newspapers have [ceased to exist](#) since 2005 and this number is expected to grow to one third by 2025. Titles dwindle in this country at a tempo of two papers every week, the reason being its fragmentation into richer and faster-growing communities with access to local news and ever more expanding media deserts.

As a result, this negative trend has left 70 million citizens or one fifth of the US population with absolutely no local news channel or with access to just one such source. Experts warn that limited access to critical news and information may influence people's every-day decisions and undermine democracy from below.

The [alarm bells are ringing](#) in the neighbouring Czechia too, where information have come out recently that as many as one half of regional newspapers have vanished over the past 10 years. Back in 2009 there were 60 titles, while in 2019 less than 30 were still active. The local expert Lenka Waschková Císařová from the Faculty of Social Studies at Masaryk University in Brno says the crisis of local journalism is partly caused by the boom of newspapers issued by local governments, adding that the expanding media deserts also give rise to more expensive public procurement, lower election turnout as well as stronger polarisation of the country.

The support for the project by the Visegrad Fund has provided us an opportunity to map the situation in Slovakia and compare it with circumstances in surrounding countries – Czechia, Poland and Hungary. Obviously, Slovakia could not have avoided this negative trend. But how serious is the situation of independent local journalism and what can be done about it? We have been looking for answers to these questions over the past few months and summarise here our findings and observations.

### Methodological note

In Slovakia, the term local medium refers to media covering the smallest geographical units, most commonly a city or a territory of a single district. As for the press, it is currently almost exclusively dominated by regional media focusing on a territory of several districts or on a natural geographical unit. Nowadays, mainly smaller television stations or some emerging web-based news servers can be regarded as having the character of local media.

A special category is formed by media dedicated to the Hungarian national communities living in the south of Slovakia along the borders with our neighbour Hungary. Besides smaller regional media in Hungarian language, there are also media covering the entire area inhabited by Hungarian-speaking population, stretching along five Slovak self-governing regions.

## MAPPING RELEVANT ACTORS

Project teams working in individual Central European countries involved in the Visegrad project have aimed to map the current situation concerning regional media. The Slovak media scene is going through major changes too. The network of regional media is gradually disappearing, and their place is being taken by actors whose quality of journalistic work is questionable.

In the communist era, the regional press was represented by three region-wide dailies (*Hlas ľudu*, *Smer* and *Východoslovenské noviny*), two evening papers published in Bratislava and Košice, and a network of district weeklies across Slovakia. After the change of the regime in 1989, this kind of press has undergone a complex development with many newly emerged titles that have also managed to attract foreign investors and later either ceased to exist or changed their periodicity. Today, only a torso remains out of what used to be relatively well-developed regional press.

The current situation is rather intricate. The space of traditional regional media is occupied by newsletters published by local administrations (they are specifically dealt with below) and commercial advertising papers that are mostly distributed directly to household mailboxes. One of these actors is the [mailbox papers network](#) *regionPress*, established in 1997 by the former Prime Minister and current minister of finance Igor Matovič. Newspapers have helped him building his own popularity and entering politics. Another advertising papers network including a news component is run by the publishing house Petit Press that in 2019 also [bought](#) the third largest mailbox papers network called *Pardon*.

It is quite often the case that printed regional media that cease to exist continue their business as web-based news portals. An example is the regional daily *Košice:Dnes* that used to be coming out for six years: in 2020 it [turned into](#) a weekly just to come to an end shortly after and today it carries on only as a web news [portal](#). However there are also new online projects emerging.

In 2021 a Slovak internet entrepreneur Milan Dubec [bought](#) a majority share in a company running the regional news portal [Žilina.sk](#) and announced his ambition to create a whole net of such portals. Or for instance, most recently, a family firm of a Swiss businessman with Slovak origin Martin Seidler [has entered](#) the regional news portal *Terajšok*.

Within the nation-wide media, there has been a long-term trend of decreasing interest in topics related to the level of democracy in local and regional environments. National opinion-making daily newspapers *Sme* and *Pravda* both closed down their regional editorial departments already a few years ago, abandoned the practice of regularly dedicating one page to news on regional developments and discontinued the regional supplement *Bratislava*.

The daily *Denník N*, which is newer, does not have a permanent section dedicated to regions and mixes regional news into the stream of home events. Its editorial staff include permanent newsmen in Banská Bystrica and Košice, as well as a reporter for Bratislava. It has recently launched a Hungarian news portal that has a regional character, with five editors writing in Hungarian language.

Both nation-wide private televisions *TV Markíza* and *TV JOJ* have a network of regional teams covering the territory of Slovakia. Within the main news service, these are focused on so-called infotainment or soft news, which is especially highlighted in regional coverage, where catastrophic events, crimes and regional curiosities are in the spotlight.

In October 2022, *TV JOJ* also [launched](#) a news channel *JOJ 24* that is aimed, among others, to help strengthening its regional coverage. Compared to *TV Markíza* and *TV JOJ*, the private news television

[TA3](#) more often focuses on the area of local and regional policies and currently has a team of five regional editors.

The widest regional news coverage is presented by *Rozhlas a televízia Slovenska* (Radio and Television of Slovakia, [RTVS](#)), a public entity combining the national television and the national radio. The public broadcaster has been strengthening its regional teams over recent years, grouped around its regional studios in Banská Bystrica and Košice. Its programme offer includes a separate radio station *Regina* dedicated to Slovak regions and there are several regional news and journalistic programmes in its broadcasting structure.

Regional coverage programmes also make part of the broadcasting structure of the newly established news channel :24, which was [launched](#) this year by RTVS initially only in relation to the Russian invasion to Ukraine but later it has been decided to keep the channel on permanent basis. In the past years, the quality and trustworthiness of the public news broadcaster were hampered by collective [contract terminations](#) of editors who criticised the situation in the institution. RTVS has been [lead](#) by a new Director General since this summer.

### Independent regional printed media

We have conducted an analysis of data provided by the [state](#) register of periodic printed media administered by the Slovak Ministry of Culture. The Ministry currently keeps records of 1,563 titles. However, this database does not provide full up-to-date information and includes inactive titles as well. There is a need to filter out and verify the data.

The image shows two screenshots from the website of the Slovak Ministry of Culture. The left screenshot displays the search interface for the 'Zoznam periodickej tlače' (List of Periodic Press). It includes a search bar with filters for 'Územný rozsah' (Regional scope) set to 'regionálny', 'Jazyk' (Language), 'Periodicita' (Frequency), and 'Obsahové zameranie' (Content focus). Below the search bar is a table listing various publications with columns for 'Evidenčné číslo' (Identification number) and 'Názov periodickej tlače' (Name of the periodic press). The right screenshot shows the 'Detail' view for a specific publication with Evidenčné číslo: EV 4684/12. It contains a numbered list of 12 fields providing detailed information about the publication, including its name, regional scope, date of first issue, language, frequency, content focus, publisher details, and ownership structure.

*Illustration photo. Source: Website of the Slovak Ministry of Culture.*

Our findings imply there are currently 39 independent printed regional titles available for over-the-counter sale. As mentioned above, the neighbouring Czech Republic, with twice the population of Slovakia, has less than 30 independent regional newspapers left (in 2019). The comparison is, however, deformed by methodological differences.

As for daily newspapers that have remained until present days, there is one Slovak regional daily *Korzár* covering the area of Eastern Slovakia (Prešov and Košice regions) and one Hungarian regional daily *Új Szó* covering the southern parts of Slovakia inhabited by Hungarian national communities.

The rest of the independent regional and local press is mainly represented by weeklies, while some regions feature fortnightly or monthlies. Their distribution is considerably asymmetrical. As many as one half of titles (19) fall under a single publishing house – Petit Press, which is, among others, the publisher of the nation-wide opinion-making daily *Sme*. Five out of 39 titles are written in Hungarian in their entirety, meaning they are newspapers coming out in the south of the country focusing on the Hungarian national minority.

### The case study on Petit Press

The publisher of the country-wide daily *Sme* started buying regional titles in 1997 when it acquired the weekly *TH Extra* published in Trnava and the news title *Prešovské noviny*. In 1998 this group was joined by the Eastern Slovakian daily *Korzár*. Petit Press has gradually dominated a large part of the regional media market, grouping the individual titles under the single mark of regional weeklies *MY*.

The German co-owners within Petit Press (the Verlagsgruppe Passau group, later Rheinisch-Bergische Verlagsgesellschaft) were replaced in 2014 by the Slovak financial group Penta. Towards the end of 2017 the latter's share in the publishing house decreased to 40%. This transaction also involved departure of the Hungarian-language daily *Új Szó* from Petit Press publishing.

Originally, Petit Press used to have as many as 30 weeklies (source: Newton Media), out of which only 19 are still running, as mentioned above. The most recent dissolutions of editorial offices by the publishing house occurred in 2021 in the cities of Šaľa and Žiar nad Hronom. In spite of streamlining measures, there are still titles that are in danger of winding up.

For the purpose of the study we interviewed the divisional managing editor Radoslav Blažek who explained that the company had to merge editorial offices of individual weeklies and create region-wide offices headed by a single managing editor for several news titles within the region. While there were 58 editors working in the weeklies in 2019, in 2022 they are only 41.



Illustration photo. Source: Petit Press

This means that on average, there are only two editors per editorial office (one of them being sports editor). The strongest titles can boast with two editors plus one sport editor. However, there are also editorial departments with less than two editors, for instance when two titles share the same sports editor.

As a consequence of streamlining editorial boards to minimum, the weeklies lack capacities to pursue more complex topics and are unable to ensure quality coverage of their region, which usually consists of several districts. Therefore they focus their attention to parts of the region enjoying the biggest readership.

The publishing house is trying to counterbalance the understaffed editorial boards by centralising other activities, such as print editors and graphic designers. The aim is to unburden the editors so that their roles are as little cumulated as possible, and they can spend more time dealing with their editorial work. Creating shared lifestyle contents suitable for all editorial offices, which is a regular part of newspapers, is another solution.

Taking new editors on board poses a problem for Petit Press weeklies. The network is facing contract terminations by journalists who are often stolen away by larger local administrations that publish their own newspapers and can offer better conditions. Employee turnover mainly occurs in younger journalists who do not find working in regional press attractive enough.

The reason is not just financial considerations: young people often prefer to go to Bratislava and write for more prestigious nation-wide media. The divisional managing editor Radoslav Blažek estimates the editorial offices are currently staffed approximately by one half of editors with a diploma in journalism, the other half being self-taught journalists.

Similar streamlining can be observed in the daily *Korzár*, one of the highest quality regional media. The six original mutations (*Košický Korzár*, *Prešovský Korzár*, *Spišský Korzár*, *Tatranský Korzár*, *Zemplínsky Korzár*, *Gemerský Korzár*) have been downsized to only two mutations (*Košický Korzár*, *Prešovský Korzár*). The daily has only one editorial office besides Košice: in Prešov.

Upon our request, the daily has provided us with data on its sales. They have fallen by almost one third over the past three years. In 2019, the year before the pandemics, the annual average number of impressions reached 6,262 sold copies, last year it was only 4,260. A decrease has been noted in the number of copies freely available for sale (by 38%), as well as in the number of subscribers (by 19%).

Thus, the situation in terms of quality journalistic coverage in the second largest city in Slovakia today looks worse than a short time ago. As stated above, another Slovak regional daily *Košice:Dnes* that used to be a competitor of *Korzár* turned into a weekly in 2020 and a year later it eventually stopped coming out in printed version. *Korzár* is losing competitors in other regions too. For example, 2020 was the final year for *Podtatranské noviny*. The second oldest newspaper of Spiš region ceased to be published only one month before reaching its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, leaving behind liabilities towards editors, advertisers, and subscribers.

Petit Press – The weekly newspapers division			
Revenues in EUR million		Average number of printed copies	
2019	2021	2019	2021
5.6	4.7	95,549 copies	77,445 copies

Korzář daily	Economic indicators			Number of copies sold (annual average)		
	Revenues	Costs	Profit	General sale	Subscribers	Total
2019	€1,586,644	€1,662,070	€–75,425	4,358	1,904	6,262
2020	€1,422,393	€1,470,786	€–48,394	3,462	1,726	5,188
2021	€1,426,488	€1,441,971	€–15,483	2,710	1,550	4,260

Source: Petit Press.

It is disturbing to note the recent rapid decrease of economic results of titles run by Petit Press, which might have been also influenced by the period of COVID-19 pandemics.

The revenues of MY regional weeklies have declined by 16% over the last three years (2019 to 2021). The cumulative number of copies has even dropped by 19%. Sales of the most successful weeklies of MY network have fallen to the threshold of 5,000 copies.

The revenues of the daily *Korzář* have decreased by 10% over the same period. The sales, however, have seen almost a 1/3 drop – by 32 percentage points. This alarming state is mainly due to the slump in the over-the-counter sale. The newspaper has been in red numbers in the long term.

### Situational survey in regional news media

As part of the study, we have tried to contact on phone managing editors of independent regional newspapers and to discuss their current situation, at least in part. We were trying to get at least basic facts about their work.

This indicative survey has pointed out that other regional newspapers find themselves in a similar or even worse situation than Petit Press. We have found five titles where the content is being created by a single person only. Editorial boards consisting of a single person can be found in the monthly newspaper of Pohronie and Poiplie regions [Reflex 24](#), the monthly [Slovo Šalánov](#) and in weeklies *Sninské noviny*, [Stropkovské spektrum](#) and *Kopaničiarsky express*.

Other titles are not able to sustain even one permanent editor. The monthly [Terra Hírújság](#) is made by two part-time editors, while the monthly [Zamaqurské noviny](#) consists of three part-timers.

These titles also come out in what really are minimum numbers of copies: for instance, according to the words of their creators, the above mentioned weekly *Sninské noviny* and monthly *Zamaqurské noviny* have 500 to 600 impressions. Another example is the monthly [RK Magazin](#), whose editor Anna Zábajníková has been nominated for the Journalism Award 2021, only comes out in 1,000 copies.

A three-member editorial board (weeklies *Pokrok*, [Záhorák](#), [Žilinský večerník](#)) is nowadays above standard in Slovak regions. Going beyond this reality are some Hungarian-language titles that are co-financed from abroad, which is a situation we describe more in detail in a separate sub-chapter.

The owner and managing editor of the fortnightly *Slovenská brána* Monika Nemčeková said they are struggling to survive. The newspaper as a whole is published by only two editors with multiple roles. Besides creating the content, they handle other activities related to publishing and distribution.

The newspaper manages to survive thanks to orders by local administrations to whom the publishing house sells a part of the impression with content dedicated to these administrations. Moreover, the monthly partly works as a corporate newspaper for two companies with whom the publisher has a long-term cooperation.

## MAP OF NEWS DESERT

We have tried to illustrate the current situation by means of a map showing the quality of regional press coverage in the territory of Slovakia. The term “map of news deserts” has emerged in the USA after hundreds of daily and weekly newspapers wound up their business in 2000s and 2010s. The situation in this country is described in the introduction to this study. Maps of news deserts show geographical areas with no or hindered access to up-to-date local news and information.

For instance, the project [MediaAccessResearch Atlas](#) offers an interactive map showing the number of local dailies combined with the share of their reader audience aged 18 or more in individual regions of the USA. Several research projects have highlighted that due to weak regional news coverage, people get no information about what is going on in their region, or the way they receive this information is too fragmented, which, as a result, decreases the population's ability to engage in the development in local communities.

### Methodology used to create the map of news deserts

We have used well-established methods of creating this type of maps, adapting them to specificities found in Slovakia. The map includes a total of 46 titles. In particular, there are two regional dailies *Korzar* and *Új Szó*, 30 regional weeklies sold over the counter, one regional fortnightly and six regional monthly newspapers.

The city of Bratislava is marked by a specific situation, as there are currently no independent regional newspapers freely available for sale. The capital was therefore taken into account by including three titles that are not for sale: *Bratislavské noviny*, *Petržalské noviny* and *Bratislavský Kuriér*, as their contents meet standards of regional press.

Indicators/Map of news deserts	
Number of regional titles in 72 districts	
Periodicity of titles	
News coverage within the region (primary, secondary, occasional)	
Language barrier (according to demography)	
Sale and distribution method	

Scaling/Map of news deserts	
Good coverage	coefficient 1.0 or higher
Partial coverage	coefficient 0.75 – 0.99
Poor coverage	coefficient 0.50 – 0.74
Insufficient coverage	coefficient 0.25 – 0.49
Minimal coverage	coefficient 0.00 – 0.24

The map also shows four titles published by local administrations – the weekly *Tempo* (owned by the city of Partizánske), the weekly *Považskobystrické novinky* (owned by the city of Považská Bystrica), the fortnightly *Ružomberský hlas* (owned by the city of Ružomberok) and the fortnightly *Tatranský dvojtýždenník* (owned by the city of Vysoké Tatry). The reason we have included them is the fact they share a commercial format similar to regional titles and are freely available for sale.

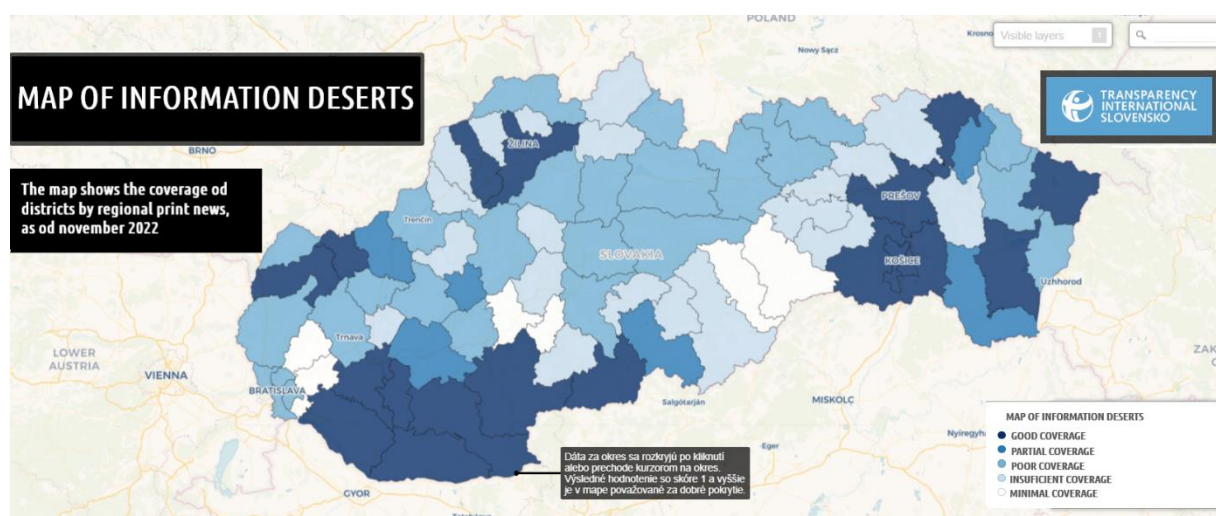
This analysis does not offer space for examining the contents of individual newspapers nor the quality of their journalistic work. The underlying principle of the map is the consideration that if there are at minimum two competing independent regional titles that come out on the territory of one district, it can be regarded as an optimal situation. In case of daily newspapers, the requirement is reduced to one title only.

Such balanced situation is represented by the coefficient equal to 1. The better the situation the higher the coefficient value, while with poorer coverage the coefficient decreases below the optimal level.

The coefficient expressing the quality of regional coverage combines several factors. A fundamental factor is the title's periodicity. Daily and weekly periodicity are considered optimal, whereas fortnightly and monthly periodicity results in lower score of the title, because such newspapers cover the regional development with less intensity.

We have also taken into account situations when titles are unable to evenly cover the whole region they declare to serve. The district where the title has its seat is regarded the primary region. Other districts are marked as secondary or even tertiary in terms of coverage and for these districts the value of coverage by the title concerned is lower.

We have also counted in the specific situation in the south of the country and the national focus of several titles that are only published in Hungarian. For this type of newspapers the level of their regional coverage is derived not only from the division into primary, secondary and tertiary regions but also from the share of Hungarian minority living in the district concerned, based on the official results of the latest population census in 2021. The penalisation has not been automatic, it has only been triggered in case of districts reaching pre-defined values.



<https://transparency.sk/sk/mapa-printovych-spravodajskych-pusti/>

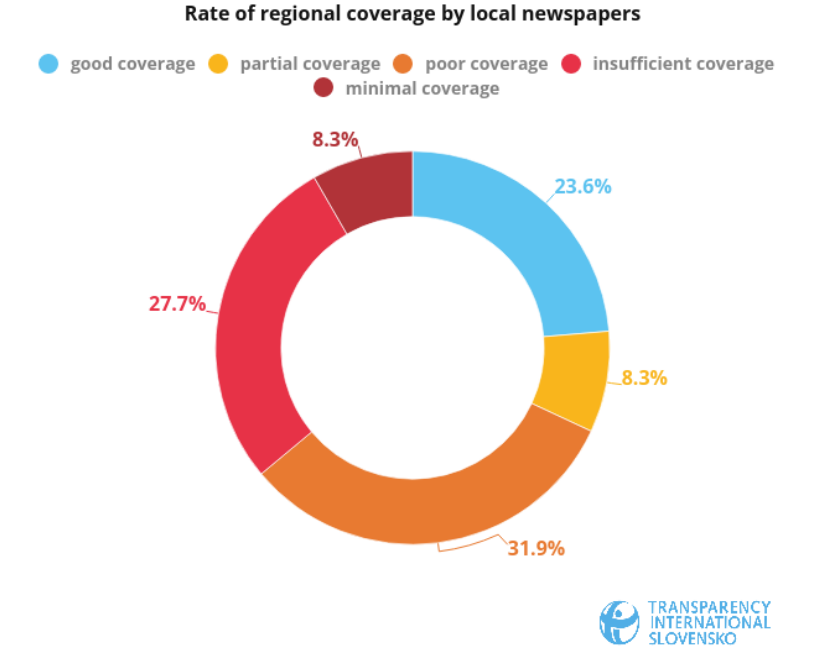
The map is divided in districts that are scaled in five colour shades depending on the quality of coverage. Districts with good regional coverage and local news service are marked with dark blue (coefficient equal to one or higher). As the situation worsens, the blue colour gets lighter and lighter, dividing the map into districts with partial coverage (0.75 – 0.99), poor coverage (0.5 – 0.74) and insufficient coverage (0.25 – 0.45). Districts with minimal coverage (0 – 0.24) are marked with white.

**Findings from the analysis of regional news coverage**

Our analysis has shown that Slovakia suffers from poor quality of regional and local news coverage. On the country-wide level, the average coefficient value has reached 0.65. When seen from the perspective of individual district values, the coefficient ranges from 0 to 1.6.

It is to be noted that these results only represent a statement of mere existence of local titles without considering the quality of their journalistic work. The situation looks less favourable when regarded from the point of view of the current situation in editorial boards.

**LOCAL MEDIA DESERTS**



Only 17 out of 72 districts, which makes less than one quarter (23.6%), have been found to cherish optimal conditions, i.e. adequate presence of at least two independent regional newspapers (good coverage).

More than one third of districts (40 out of 72) are covered only partially or poorly. It means they are in the spotlight of only one regional title or there may be more titles covering them, but they do so only marginally.

More than one third of the country's territory is taken up by news deserts. The number of districts with insufficient or minimal coverage reaches 26 out of 72, accounting to 36.1%.

There are two districts (Pezinok and Banská Štiavnica) with no active independent regional printed periodicals. Another three districts (Senec, Revúca, Rožňava) get only partial attention from Hungarian minority-oriented press. Minimal coverage can also be observed in the district of Žarnovica where coverage is partially provided by a single fortnightly newspaper.

### Case study: regional press in Hungarian language

While the map of information deserts looks quite unflattering, it is true to say that it would look even worse were it not for the regional press published in Hungarian. If it did not exist, the optimal state would have been reached only in 10 instead of 17 districts out of total 72.

There are 13 districts with a marked share of Hungarian national communities (10% or more) and as many as 8 of them have good coverage, while 2 have partially good coverage.

Among all Slovak districts, the best situation can be found in Komárno (coefficient equal to 1.6), as it can boast with strong coverage by three national minority regional titles (one daily and two weeklies).

There are in particular two titles that contribute to these favourable conditions in the area of Hungarian-language regional press. Firstly, it is the traditional regional daily [Új Szó](#) that has been coming out in Hungarian language since 1948. Until recently it has belonged to the portfolio of Petit Press publishing, with the investment group Penta as the majority shareholder. One of the changes in ownership system within Petit Press (decrease in shares held by Penta group) has also been the sale of the daily [Új Szó](#) that has moved under the biggest Slovak media corporation [News and Media Holding](#) (owned by the financial group Penta).



Illustration picture. Source: ma7.sk

Another key player in the field of Hungarian-language regional press is the society-oriented weekly [Magyar7](#) seated in Dunajská Streda. It was founded in 2019 together with the news portal [ma7.sk](#) by

Pro Media foundation, which had been established, among other reasons, in order to strengthen mass media serving the Hungarian minority in Slovakia.

According to the foundation's 2021 annual report, the editorial office of this weekly coming out in 8,000 copies has 30 employees and 20 external contractors. The annual report also informs that last year the title had 4,500 to 5,000 subscribers, which is three times more than the Slovak regional daily *Korzár* (1,550 in 2021). In addition, the newspaper is distributed in free sale.

Pro Media foundation and <i>Magyar7</i> weekly	Subsidy from Bethlen Gábor Alapkezelő Zrt (EUR million)	Operational costs (EUR million)
2017	1.52	–
2018	–	–
2019	1.48	1.11
2020	1.41	1.2
2021	1.30	1.07
Source: Annual reports of Pro Media foundation		

It is a massive media project when compared with the situation in Slovak regions and it benefits from the financial support of Gábor Bethlen Fund, which is financed by the government of Hungary. The Hungarian government has poured EUR 5.71 million into this foundation since it was established. Every year over the past three years, the operation of the weekly newspaper has been subsidised by more than EUR 1 million. These are extraordinary financial subsidies for Slovakian context. Just for comparison, in the first three years of its existence before becoming self-sufficient, the nation-wide *Denník N* daily needed [support from its founders](#) from the software company Eset amounting in total to EUR 600,000.

Hungary led by the governmental party Fidesz is facing criticism from the European Union for interfering in independent media. High subsidies benefiting *Magyar7* distort conditions in the Slovak media market and give this title an advantage over its competitors.

## ANALYSIS OF ECONOMIC RESULTS OF REGIONAL PRESS

When analysing economic results of local independent printed periodicals, we have looked into data and financial indicators of 25 publishing houses. We have managed to gather data about 15 of them in publicly accessible registries (Finstat, Business Register and Register of Financial Statements). Another 19 titles of *MY* newspapers and the *Korzár* daily are being published by Petit Press, which has provided us with information upon our request.

Altogether, we have been able to analyse data on 35 periodicals. Due to their legal form (self-employed persons and civic associations), the remaining 9 publishers are not obliged to make their financial results publicly available and thus we can outline the financial situation of local periodicals only based on estimates. It is also important to note that it has been quite challenging to separate relevant financial information in publishing houses with wider scope.

The following graphs show the sectoral structure of contracts and the most common suppliers of the city of Nitra over the past 10 years, derived from the portal tender.sme.sk that offers visual processing of data taken from the Public procurement journal. The data point out that in Nitra, the largest volume of finance, EUR 20.6 million, has been spent in the area of construction. This makes up for 83% of the city's total volume of contracts.

Publishing house	Local newspapers	Revenues in 2021
Záhorák, s. r. o.	Záhorák	96 685,00 €
DELTA Kt s. r. o.	Delta	78 687,00 €
SB Press, s.r.o.	Slovenská brána	98 382,00 €
Fantázia media, s.r.o.	Slovo Šalanov	50 796,00 €
Excel Media Group, s.r.o.	Podvihorlatské noviny	96 899,00 €
KOEX-PRESS, spol.s r.o.	Kopaničiar express	85 871,00 €
WINTER média, a.s.	Piešťanský týždeň	129 254,00 €
R PRESS s.r.o.	RK Magazín	19 583,00 €
NIVEL PLUS s.r.o.	Bratislavské noviny, Petržalské noviny	284 153,00 €
Staromešťan s.r.o.	Bratislavský kuriér	47 494,00 €
YDAVATELSTVO TEMPO, s.r.o.	Tempo	83 035,00 €
PUBLISHING HOUSE, a.s.	Žilinský večerník	433 184,00 €
Kultúrny dom A.Hlinku, a.s.	Ružomerský hlas	15 698,00 €
Pro Media nadácia - Pro Media Alapítvány	Magyar7	* 1 065 670,68 €
DUEL - PRESS s.r.o.	Új Szó	** 2 782 700,00 €
Petit Press, a.s.	MY Noviny (19 titulov)	4 700 000,00 €
Petit Press, a.s.	Korzár	1 426 488,00 €

Source: Finstat.sk

\* Revenues expressed in costs, due to the unavailability of revenues achieved data

\*\* Sum of revenues of analyzed newspapers Új Szó and not-analyzed newspapers Vasárnap

The 35 local newspapers analysed are backed by publishing houses that have the legal form of limited company and joint stock company. The revenues of these publishing houses related to their periodicals vary depending on the share of district coverage by individual periodicals.

We can definitely come to a conclusion that the biggest player in terms of Slovak districts coverage and at the same time in terms of revenues are *MY* newspapers and the daily *Korzár*, published by Petit

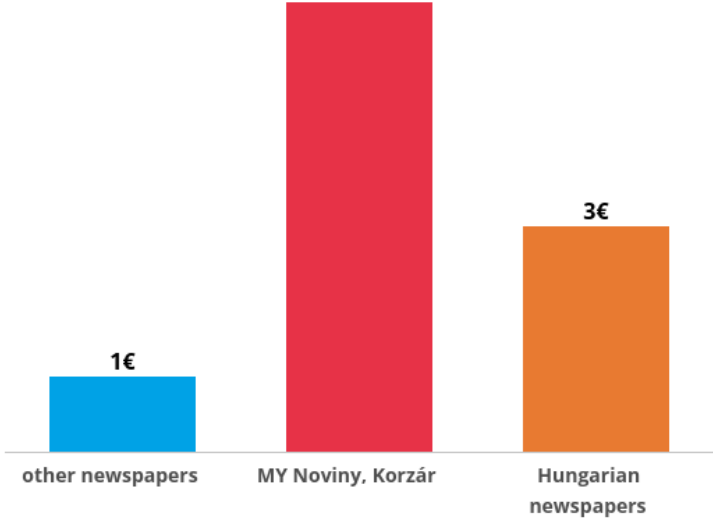
Press. Together they make 20 titles that produced more than EUR 6 million from the sale of newspapers in 2021, which is approximately 30% more than all other local media counted together.

In total, the independent local printed periodicals under analysis made about EUR 11.4 million in 2021. We tried to estimate the revenues of the remaining 9 periodicals based on average amount of revenues of other titles: the resulting estimated total amount of local independent newspapers is EUR 12.5 million in 2021.

When looking into revenues, we have also focused on figures reported by 56 local televisions in Slovakia. Their revenues reach almost a half of those of independent printed titles, i.e. EUR 4.3 million.

## LOCAL NEWS REVENUES IN 2021

Revenues in 2021 of MY Noviny newspapers compared to Korzár and Hungarian newspapers and other local newspapers



As for the analysis of revenues development over time, we have found a 14% decrease of revenues of publishing houses between 2019 and 2021. Although the sector of journalism does not seem to have been impacted by the pandemics in such a devastating way as for example the gastronomic industry that has suffered approximately 70 – 80% fall of revenues, it is not a negligible decline. Given the considerable understaffing in local journalism, this decrease only puts more pressure on the general unfavourable situation.

## HOW MUNICIPAL NEWSPAPERS CONTRIBUTE TO THE CRISIS OF LOCAL JOURNALISM

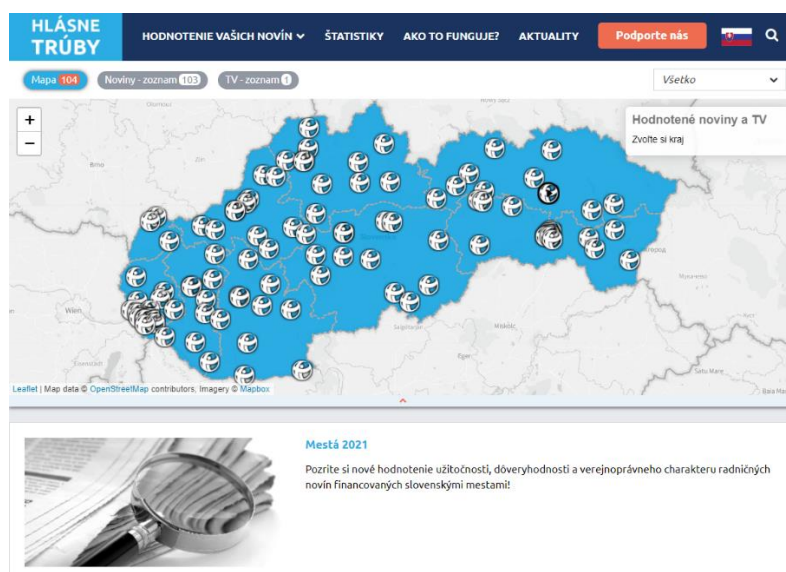
Slovak regions are dominated by media owned by local administrations – self-governing regions, cities and municipalities. The state's [list of printed periodicals](#), administered by the Ministry of Culture, contains as many as 470 so called municipal titles, which is ten times more than independent regional titles. They are printed newspapers that are usually published every month and they are not available for sale – local administrations distribute thousands of their copies to household mailboxes.

For instance Bačkovík, a small village in the east of Slovakia with 582 inhabitants, also has its own municipal [newsletter](#). The village mayor himself used to write its entire content, until recently. This changed after TIS had pointed it out. Currently, out of 100 largest Slovak local administrations there are 84 that publish their own printed newspaper. The mayor of the capital city Matúš Vallo increased the number of copies of the monthly *In.ba* from 36,500 to 192,000 copies in 2021, one year before elections. The publishing costs have reached EUR 112,000 (the most expensive municipal newspaper).

Each of the eight self-governing regions also publishes its own printed periodical. In the year of elections, the president of Košice self-governing region Rastislav Trnka increased the number of copies of the occasional paper with a catchy marketing title *Rozhýbaný kraj* (region in movement) to 330,000 copies, while the self-governing region informed that publishing costs will reach EUR 340,000 (the most expensive self-governing region newspaper). Both political figures have successfully retained their office.

### Evaluation of municipal newspapers

In February 2022, TIS conducted the [third objectivity ranking of municipal newspapers](#) that are published by 100 largest local administrations (2016, 2018 and 2021), followed shortly after by the third ranking of newspapers published by self-governing regions (2017, 2020 and 2022). We could not help coming to a conclusion that media continue to be unduly misused for promotion of the local administration leaders.



The evaluation is available on the web: <https://hlasnetruby.transparency.sk/>

As for municipal newspapers, the overall level of Index Benefit that measures the public nature of newspapers has increased only by three percentage points – from 49% in 2018 to 52% in 2021. This improvement has marked breaking the psychological 50% threshold where the periodicals leave the ranking “detrimental” (with negative indicators dominating over the positive ones) to enter the ranking zone “beneficial”. However, one third of the largest local administrations have still remained below this threshold. Only 14 out of 84 evaluated titles have managed to get considerably ahead of the average score (higher than 60% of the index).

<b>Evaluation of municipal newspapers <i>Hlásne trúby</i> 2021</b>
Assessment of 415 editions of municipal newspapers in one hundred largest local administrations.
All local administration titles in one place
Statistical data, e.g. that 59% of local papers editions lack any polemical viewpoint
Recommendations
Trends
Possibility to report a case of misusing municipal newspapers

It is still hard to find contributions in local newspapers that would question the steps taken by the administration leadership. More than a half out of 420 evaluated editions (59%) contained no critical opinion at all, which points to stagnation when compared to 2018 (58%). Almost two thirds of newspapers (60%) were excessively publishing photographs of mayors (63% in 2018). Some municipal newspapers continued to be misused by mayors for direct attacks against their critics.

Statements harming the opponents without the possibility to react were observed almost in every tenth edition (8%) (in 2018 it was 15%). Thus, on average, city newspapers still presented almost exclusively the viewpoints of the current municipal council, highlighting only its positive achievements. Mayors usually did not misuse the papers in an open way. There was seldom a photograph of the mayor on the front page. However, the newspapers were dominated by their opinions. There was limited space for opposite opinions or sporadic criticism.

A survey made by TIS, showing a number of improvements in issues related to standards of journalism, was also a part of the evaluation. Almost three fourths of evaluated city periodicals (71%) had an editorial board in 2021, while in 2018 it was only 55%. A half of local administration (49%) adopted their own editorial statutes (one third, 34%, in 2018).

	2018	2021
Editorial Bord	55% of municipalities	71% of municipalities
Editorial Statute	34% of municipalities	49% of municipalities
Code of Ethics	minimum	26% of municipalities

Source: survey TIS, *Hlásne Trúby* 2021

Municipal newspapers were, however, still mostly under the control of politicians. As many as one fifth of them admitted that the mayor is directly involved in the paper's final version. The editorial board had a final word in almost half of newspapers, usually under the mayor's supervision. Only one third of city papers declared to have editorial independence, although this could not be seen in the content of many of them.

In the period preceding the 2022 elections we observed worsening of the situation. TIS received a number of complaints pointing out to specific forms of misusing municipal newspapers. We have also evaluated pre-election editions of periodicals published by city districts of Bratislava. Only one third out of 12 titles showed no problems.

In five titles, one third to one half of the edition's content was praising the current mayor, mostly in form of PR articles promoting the district council achievements. In addition, significant space was given to statements of mayors. The newspaper of the city part Rača even published the photograph of the mayor on the front page. Challengers of mayors tended to be totally ignored by these newspapers.

In the three titles that achieved the worst ranking, more than a half of their content was dedicated to the current mayor. In the newspaper of the city part Karlova Ves there were even two thirds of such content. The newspaper of the city part Podunajské Biskupice featured as many as 7 photographs of the mayor in its pre-election issue. Moreover, in this case the author of the article was the mayor himself who praised his own person for having donated flower decorations for the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows. There were also 6 photographs of the mayor in the issue of Vrakuňa newspapers. The mayor wrote an article highlighting his contribution to establishing a police station in this city district.

Mayors mentioned above have retained their mayorship. As [calculated](#) by TIS, the use by mayors of benefits derived from their function was overwhelming in the elections. As many as 86% of those running for re-election managed to keep their mandate, which is even more than four years ago. It is undoubtedly a result of their good work, but to some extent it is also due to the advantage in the form of misusing the local periodicals. In this way, campaigns of sitting mayors were de facto inflated from public resources – if costs were to be counted, it might show that electoral limits had been exceeded.

In this context, we find significant the result of the [survey](#) conducted in June 2021 by the renowned agency Focus that showed that only 14% of people realised the need to critically assess the contents of local administration newspapers.

## Local televisions

Several local administrations in Slovakia not only publish newspapers but they also own separate media companies. An example is Ružinov, the city part of Bratislava that a quarter of century ago founded a business company that not only publishes the city part's monthly but also operates a television with its own TV licence. A similar media company is also owned by the city of Partizánske. It runs the city television and at the same time it publishes a commercial regional weekly that is freely available for sale and covers the territory of two districts.

The most frequent reason to establish a city media company is, however, solely the operation of a city television. Our analysis has shown that almost a half (29) out of 65 televisions that are currently [associated](#) under the Association of local and regional televisions are in the ownership of local governments.

Thus, among local administrations that have their own television are three city parts of Bratislava, the regional capital Trnava, a number of smaller towns across Slovakia, as well as three municipalities – Komjatice, Močenok and Štrba – that have less than 5,000 inhabitants.

### TV Sen

Even a part of private local and regional televisions is tightly linked to financial resources from municipal budgets. An example is [TV SEN](#), a television that provides news services for five towns in the westernmost part of Slovakia (Senica, Skalica, Myjava, Brezová pod Bradlom, Stará Turá). Its operator is Videoštúdio RIS, s.r.o.

<b>TV SEN – revenues in 2021</b>	
Municipality	Total incomes for 2021 (EUR)
The city of Senica	79,241
The city of Myjava	28,581
The city of Brezová pod Bradlom	21,850.80
The city of Stará Turá	3,708
<b>Total</b>	<b>133,381</b>

*Source: Municipalities websites*

The core function of this regional television covering the westernmost part of Slovakia is providing services for the largest local municipalities. Our analysis shows that incomes from municipal budgets form a substantial part of the television's revenues and the company is economically dependent on them.

In 2021, Videoštúdio RIS reached revenues amounting to EUR 158,762 (source: Finstat.sk). 84% of this sum came from four municipalities – Senica, Myjava, Brezová Pod Bradlom, Stará Turá.

Based on long-term contracts, TV Sen produces and broadcasts news programmes for these municipalities, including records of municipal council meetings as well as videotext notices.

Such a high level of connectedness to public sources deforms the quality of television news provided by the private television, meaning it cannot be regarded independent. This is also demonstrated by a contract with the city of Skalica that also used to be covered by the TV news service.

In this contract, the television agreed that the local administration would have the right to be a member of the editorial board and to actively participate in approving and creation of the contents of news reports ([contract for work between the city of Skalica and Videoštúdio RIS from 24 August 2011](#)).

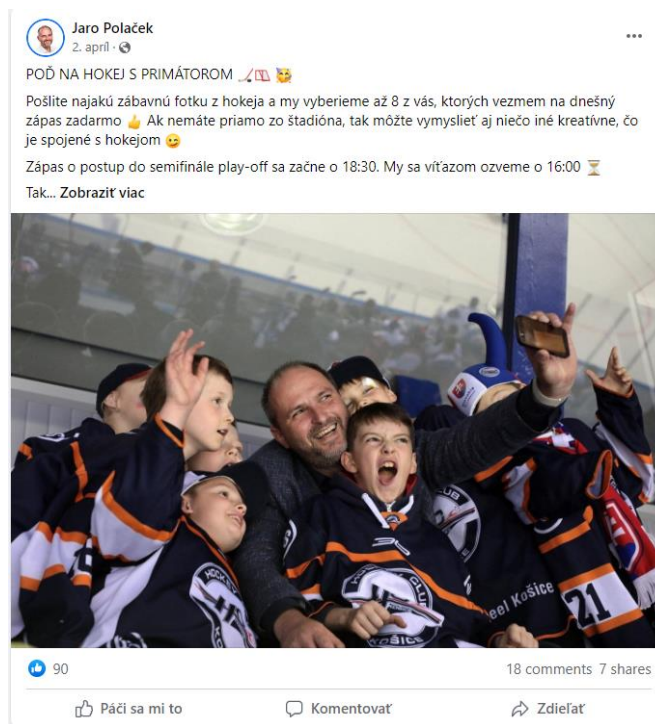
Thanks to this commitment the television won a two-year contract for the creation of 104 news programmes in total value of EUR 107,640.

## Local administrations on Facebook

Regular communication via pages on Facebook, the most popular and widely used social network in Slovakia, is an inseparable part of media policies of local administrations. It is not seldom that larger administrations sponsor their content on social networks. For instance, [according to our findings](#), the capital Bratislava invested EUR 7,099 in advertisements on Facebook in Q1 2022 (source: Ad Library, Meta).

For 2022, the year of elections, Bratislava has earmarked EUR 30,000 for sponsoring on social networks, stating it intends to draw EUR 22,000 of that amount. It is eleven times more than the projected costs of Nitra, which is in the second place. Five out of eight regional capitals implement social networks sponsoring.

The quality of this type of news is even more questionable than with municipal newspapers, which is also due to the absolute non-existence of any formal rules and standards. While space for the opposition is quite limited in municipal newspapers, in social media the opposition is usually completely excluded when it comes to the possibility to officially share information. By contrast, the local leadership gets above-standard space here, as results from findings of TIS. Very often this space is used to present costly videos.



Zdroj: Facebook, profil primátora Košíc.

Illustration picture. Source: FB page of the mayor of Košice

Another problem highlighted by TIS is the fact that larger administrations use not only their own profiles but also communicate through the profiles of their mayors. These are being used by sitting political figures to build their popularity, including by drawing from municipal resources and using the help of municipal staff who prepare the content and often work as direct administrators of these profiles.

In practice this could be for instance seen in the fact that the Facebook page of the second largest Slovak city Košice posted six videos featuring the mayor during March 2022, while the mayor's profile alone presented three times more such videos. When a negative piece of information appeared in the local media in April that Košice would not be able to buy new trams using EU funds, the city mayor tried to plaster it by a post in his mayoral profile [offering](#) the city inhabitants free ice-hockey tickets with seats in the city skybox.

In the pre-election period, mayors' profiles become a considerable advantage over the competitors. Several sitting mayors were running their campaigns on their profiles. The mayors of Bratislava and Nitra, for instance, informed on their mayoral profiles that they had managed to collect signatures needed to establish their regional political parties. Profiles of mayors included a mix of similar political messages and other mayoral [messages](#) related to positive news about successful actions of local administrations.

## CONCLUSION

In June 2022 TIS organised a [discussion](#) round-table as an attempt to assess the situation of Slovak regional journalism. It was attended by almost twenty representatives of regional and municipal media, professional organisations, and media experts.

The participants of the discussion have come to a common agreement that regional journalism is in crisis today and will shortly get beyond a point when it will not be able to do without some state authority intervention.

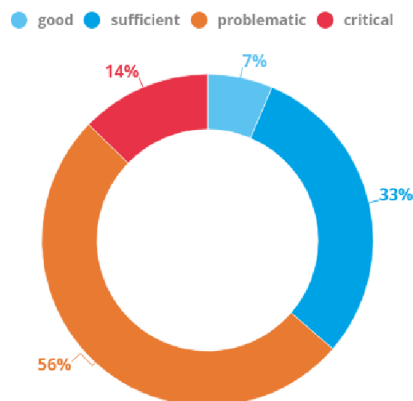
### Indicative research into the situation of regional media

In this context, we also presented results of our own indicative survey in which representatives of local, regional and municipal media, journalists, municipal spokespersons, members of municipal councils – members of cultural committees, members of regional councils, academics, analysts and other experts answered to a questionnaire dedicated to local journalism and the specific role of municipal media. 77 respondents provided their replies.

When asked the basic evaluation question “What is the situation of independent local and regional media”, almost a half of them stated that the situation was problematic. 14% regard the situation as critical. One third of respondents believe the situation to be satisfactory and only 7% think it is good.

## SITUATION OF INDEPENDENT LOCAL AND REGIONAL MEDIA

How would you assess an overall situation of independent privately owned local media in Slovakia?



Poll TIS, jún 2022. 77 respondents

Participants in the survey have indicated low quality of content processing (46%), lack of critical journalism (41%), hidden PR and advertising content (40%) and abandoning investigative work (38%) to be the most significant shortcomings of regional media.

As for threats faced by this type of media, participants in the survey have particularly named insufficient financing of editorial boards (54%), lack of good quality personal capacities in the market (42%), economic problems of owners of such media (33%) and the media focus on numbers of readers/audiences (30%).

Respondents believe solutions can be to provide state support (49%), which currently does not exist, to engage in broad public discussions pointing out to the importance of local journalism (42%) and to increase transparency of this media market sector (32%).

### Problems, their causes and possible solutions

It is no surprise how the situation of independent regional media in Slovakia has developed. TIS finds the developments quite logical and even natural. Following decades of growth and then twenty years of decline, printed regional newspapers have come to an existence crossroad. No type of so-called new media has so far fully taken over their important and irreplaceable role.

It appears now that most probably they will be replaced by local/regional web-based news portals that are nowadays increasing in numbers. Their start and their needed quality are hindered by obstacles in finding appropriate economic model that would ensure their survival.

Due to bad economic situation of publishing houses, editorial boards are understaffed and at the same time they have troubles attracting qualified journalists, as they cannot offer them attractive salaries. As a result, the quality of regional newspapers content is declining.

This unfavourable situation is complicated even more by other phenomena. Slovak regions are no exception when it comes to negative trends related to electronic communications, internet, social media and the global media crisis linked to them. However, the rise of advertising newspapers that are not for sale, has a significant impact on the situation too, as they cut away a major part of the advertisement cake in the regional context.

Usually they are titles distributed for free to household mailboxes. These titles offer a limited portion of news, journalistic or leisure content in addition to advertising, which may satisfy the population needs in terms of information about regional developments.

However, bad situation of independent regional news is also partly caused by municipal periodicals that have been on the rise across Slovakia. The latter are titles with questionable content quality, failing to comply with basic journalistic standards and yet often featuring attractive visuals owed to considerable investments of local administrations to their media policies.

Social networks are also becoming a stable player on the scene, satisfying the need for regional information, although they provide environment where various interest groups often thrive. However, same as with municipal newspapers, this media space lacks the rule of journalistic standards and falls out of scope of any state supervision.

Slovakia has come to a point where the map of regional media has turned critically pale, solid journalism is retreating from its feeble positions and the freed space is being often taken up by problematic actors. This situation is a direct threat to democracy on local and regional levels, as the role of public control by independent media is important here in the same way as it is on the national level.

TIS believes it is an alarming situation when more than one third of Slovakia is scattered with information deserts, the other third of the territory has problems with coverage by independent

regional news and the remaining parts are covered by news of questionable quality. It is necessary for relevant state authorities to turn their attention to these problems. TIS sees scope for intervention that might at least alleviate the negative trend.

<b>Recommendations</b>
Apply reduced 10% tax rate also on regional printed media
Create a mechanism to support independent regional media that might at least partially improve the situation in regions with low coverage by good quality regional news
Define the role of local administration media within legislation, assign the status of public media to them and set minimal standards for their work
Establish an independent media board that would supervise printed media including the regional ones

To support printed media, the state has decided to include them for 2022 in the group of goods subject to reduced VAT rate (10%, half of full rate). The tax benefit only applies to newspapers and magazines published at least four times a week, meaning this measure does not reach out to the majority of regional titles (usually weeklies), which continue to be sold at 20% rate. This favourable rate could be also extended to regional media freely available for sale.

This form of financial support for media on regional level is not enough. The solution could be to create a state fund to support independent regional media that would at least partially rectify unfavourable situation related to information deserts and regions with problematic coverage.

However, in light of the questionable quality of a part of regional media, the state support should not be directed only towards existing titles. It would be desirable to also support creation of new media projects focusing on good quality regional journalism. We also see scope for better involvement of media faculties of Slovak universities.

The state authority should also turn its attention to municipal newspapers that are currently outside any regulation. In addition to adopting relevant legislation to define the status of municipal newspapers that share many attributes of public media, it would also be good if they were subject to supervision.

In our opinion, the solution could take the form of establishing an independent media board that would supervise printed media including regional and municipal periodicals in a similar way as the Board for Media Services that primarily oversees television and radio broadcasting.

This task is being partially performed by the Print-Digital Council of the Slovak Republic, which is the executive body of the Association for the Protection of journalistic ethics in the field of ethical self-regulation of journalists. Its activities consist of addressing complaints about possible violation of journalistic ethic. It has no efficient leverage in relation to publishing houses.



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