



**A BOOKLET SUMMARISING
RESEARCH IN V4 COUNTRIES**

THE CRISIS OF LOCAL JOURNALISM IN V4 COUNTRIES
AND THE SPECIFIC ROLE OF MUNICIPAL NEWSPAPERS

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

A booklet summarising research in V4 countries



TRANSPARENCY
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INTRODUCTION

You are holding a collection of papers on the crisis of local journalism, in which you will find conclusions from research and analysis of the state of regional journalism in individual countries and their comparison with each other. Thanks to the support from the [Visegrad Fund](#), we were able to join forces, on behalf of the NGO [Oživení, z.s.](#), with [Slovak Transparency International](#), the Polish [Civic Network Watchdog](#) and [Hungarian Merték Media Monitor](#) to examine the state of regional journalism, with a special focus on the position of municipal newspapers. The regional media level and its problems are neglected in all V4 countries. In each country we mapped out the relevant actors and their position in the regional media environment, analysed the main reasons why independent regional journalism is disappearing, and paid special attention to the media of cities and regions and their influence on the situation in the regions.

WHY DO WE CONSIDER THE TOPIC OF LOCAL JOURNALISM IMPORTANT?

The general trends of media development also apply to the local level, but the impacts are much more dramatic. The crisis of print media, the disintegration of the original funding model, and the emergence of new forms of media are also manifested here. Changes in media ownership, new formats, and a long-term underestimation of and disinterest in the topic of regional media have resulted in the current state of affairs - a lack of quality media.

Over the last ten years, the number of regions in the V4 countries lacking quality independent media has been steadily increasing. The term news desert has been coined for these areas. Residents of these regions lack balanced and objective information about local events, regional politicians are not under the control of local „watchdogs“, and the media have become instruments of various influences or pure vehicles for advertising without any ambition to fulfil a news role.

International studies show that where local media disappear, voter turnout and citizen activism at the local level decreases¹. In the V4 countries, the vacancy was most often filled by media that have a direct relationship with the leadership of cities and regions. Municipal newspapers, regional television, social media presentations. All of these media outlets face the characteristic problems of censorship and abuse by local politicians and the lack of professionalism of newspaper staff and editors. Municipal newspapers are not recognised as media by many journalists and experts and are even cited as one of the causes of the crisis in local journalism. Although the situation is in some ways very similar in all V4 countries, each country presents a slightly different perspective on how to improve the situation,

how to deal with the dominance of low-quality media and how systematic support for the development of quality regional journalism could work. Attacks on the independence of the national media have long been addressed in V4 countries, but regional journalism has remained on the sidelines of the public debate. Therefore, journalists, publishers, media experts and other experts were brought together in each country and the following contributions present the outcomes and conclusions of these meetings and analyses.

In this booklet, we present some of the findings of the local research, the full text of the policy papers can be found [here](#).

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¹https://www.irozhlaz.cz/zpravy-domov/regionalni-lokalni-noviny-media-denik-lenka-cisarova_2002030630_jab

TERMINOLOGICAL NOTES

One of the big challenges of the whole project was to unify the terms so that the situation in each country would be comparable and understandable for the reader. The basic problem is that the classification of different types of media is not clear even at national levels. The primary focus of the study is on regional news coverage and the formats and types of media that deliver news or appear to do so to readers/viewers.

The main terms we use in the study

Local and regional media: the term local refers mainly to the geographical coverage within one municipality, while regional media cover a larger territorial unit - district, region, county.

Municipal newspapers and other local government media: they are defined by their connection to local government, although they are not always published directly by local government. In the case of TV and a minority of municipal newspapers or other formats, it is a matter of contracting the publication to private entities.

Advertising media: defined not by a very lack of journalistic work, but by the extensive business department for securing advertising on which their economic model is based.

Print media, online media, news websites/portals, television, radio: The study primarily focuses on print media, for which the most data exists in all countries.

CZECH REPUBLIC

LOCAL LEVEL - CURRENT SITUATION

Minimal systemic and legislative grasp is specific to the regional level of journalism, especially for print and online media. At the same time, the situation of the regions is rarely part of public debates in the Czech Republic, and this also applies to the discussion of media problems. Historical changes in media ownership, new formats, and a long-term underestimation of and disinterest in the topic of regional media have resulted in the current state of affairs - a lack of quality media, lack of transparency, a lack of statistical data that would allow for a better understanding of the situation, and the rise of media that are financially and content-dependent on regional governing structures.

According to the 2021 assessment of The Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, the indicator „Access to media for local/regional communities and community media“ has a high long-term risk level (75%). The reasons, according to Štětka, lie in the lack of a legislative framework for community media and in the weak support of local media by the state².

There are many regions in the Czech Republic that are specific, have their own needs and problems and for their solution information from the national level is not sufficient. This is where the oft-mentioned link between independent, quality journalism and democracy lies - local issues need to be addressed through debate, but this must be based on factual information.

Regional editorial offices are disappearing, and the original local print newspapers are closing down, mostly because no younger successor can be found to ensure continuation. The vacant space was filled by formats that are usually far from quality information. Probably

the strongest are the media that belong directly to local governments - municipal newspapers, television and radio. However, these media are often unable to meet the basic qualities of information, as the content is directly approved/controlled by elected representatives of cities and regions. Oživení has long pointed to the unbalanced presentation of different opinions in these media.

²<https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/74708/MPM2022-TheCzechRepublic-CS.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>

MAPPING RELEVANT ACTORS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP IN THE REGIONAL MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

The regional level is facing major fragmentation. As a consequence, it is difficult to obtain data that would provide a comprehensive overview. The regional press and other regional media are not tracked in the statistics³, so basic data is missing. Media formats published by municipalities, towns and regions have been massively expanded. At the same time, however, there are many private entities operating at the regional level from which local governments often buy media content or pay them to publish municipal newspapers. As we show below, these companies receive significant sums from public budgets. This is especially true for regional TV revenue, but also for media groups that specialize in free municipal and in-house print titles to mailboxes. Although independent print news is declining, several news portals have emerged that can be seen as evidence that reviving regional news coverage may not be a pipe dream. These include, for example, the Boskovic-based Ohlasy⁴ or the Drbna.cz regional online news network, which is gradually being centralised, as is the case with other regional media networks⁵.

Independent local/regional print media

The database of printed periodicals is managed by the Ministry of Culture, but the database does not provide an overview of regional printed news because this type is not included in the content classification⁶.

An overview of the local print media that are dedicated to news is provided mainly by the research of Lenka Waschková Císařová. According to the database on the lokalnik.cz website, in 2009 there were a total of 60 regional/local independent media in the Czech Republic that were dedicated to reporting on local events. In 2019, there were 29 remaining and they are still disappearing.

For her research, Waschková Císařová defines a regional press as a periodical published on the territory of a municipality, city, district, region or county that meets selected internal characteristics of a news media: a minimum frequency of 24 copies per year; only paid newspapers (not free newspapers); only privately owned newspapers (not newspapers published by local governments); and with a general news content focus (i.e. not advertising or PR periodicals)⁷.

³[Office of Print Cost Verification of the Czech Republic](#) records data only for the Vltava Labe media publishing house Daily newspapers and for the regional monthly newspapers the data is for the Prague 8 municipal newspaper. The Publishers' Union and its surveys provide no other data. According to the latest data, less than 400,000 people read the Daily newspaper edition - http://www.unievydavatelu.cz/gallery/files/2022_11_10%20-%20UV%20-%20Z%20C3%A1kladn%C3%AD%20v%C3%BDsledky%20MEDIA%20PROJEKTU%20za%204_%20Q%202021%20a%C5%BE%203_%20Q_%202022.pdf

⁴<https://ohlasy.info/>

⁵<https://www.drbna.cz/o-projektu.html>

⁶<https://www.mkcr.cz/tridnik-obsahoveho-zamereni-cs-482>

⁷http://www.clovekamedia.cz/konference/sborniky/cm_2012_podzim.pdf

According to data from the Ministry of Culture, the majority of newspaper publishers are based in the capital city of Prague, while the Ministry does not register any newspaper publishers in five regions - Plzeň, Karlovy Vary, Ústí nad Labem, Zlín and Moravia-Silesia⁸.

The Ministry also monitors statistics on periodical and non-periodical press titles, but does not distinguish

between regional and national levels.

The Vltava Labe media publishing house, which publishes Denik.cz, has long played a dominant role in the regional press. The historical development, which included stages of centralisation and acquisition of regional media as well as stages of development of regional editorial offices, is again the focus of Waschková Císařová's research⁹.

Region	Publishers	Titles	Costs	Unsold copies
Česká republika	19	153	151 835 743	22 094 944
Hlavní město Praha	5	8	145 232 813	22 069 206
Středočeský kraj	2	-	-	-
Jihočeský kraj	2	-	-	-
Plzeňský kraj	-	-	-	-
Karlovarský kraj	-	-	-	-
Ústecký kraj	-	-	-	-
Liberecký kraj	1	1	16 200	1 105
Královhradecký kraj	3	3	542 570	24 633
Pardubický kraj	1	-	-	-
Vysočina	1	-	-	-
Jihomoravský kraj	3	1	451 440	-
Olomoucký kraj	1	1	14 500	-
Zlínský kraj	-	-	-	-
Moravskoslezský kraj	-	-	-	-

⁸<https://www.statistikakultury.cz/zakladni-statisticke-udaje/>, https://www.statistikakultury.cz/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ZSU3_2021_Knihovny_a_vydavatelska_cinnost.pdf

⁹A brief description of developments up to 2012 in the conference paper Man and Media - http://www.clovekamedia.cz/konference/sborniky/cm_2012_podzim.pdf

Regional TV

The need for a TV broadcasting licence makes data on the number of regional TV stations more readily available than for the regional press. According to the 2021 annual report of the Radio and Television Broadcasting Council (RRTV), 31 regional/local television licences were granted¹⁰. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that the situation in the field of regional TV is clear and easy to describe. Broadcasting is poorly monitored, enforcement of rules does not work well. In 2020, Oživení analysed the contracting of television programmes purchased by the regions. Some regions, such as the Moravian-Silesian region, have contracts with up to 4 TV stations, while in some regions such broadcasting is not provided at all. We found several violations that are difficult for RRTV to enforce. See the example of Liberecká TV in the text below.

There is a complete lack of overview in the provision of city and municipal television. One example that demonstrates the difficulty of untangling relationships is the Municipal TV Příbor. On the city's official website, the TV is listed with a schedule of reports and a link to the Local TV Příbor website^{11,12}. The city has a contract with Mgr. Irena Nedomová, who is also listed on the website as the only contact¹³ for the editorial office. On the television's website it can already be traced that it belongs to the Pohoda media group¹⁴. According to

data from the State Treasury, the recipient of money from the town of Příbor between 2018 and 2021 was the company Local TV Plus s.r.o. - part of the Pohoda media group. This is despite the fact that it is not listed as a supplier in the contract. Similarly, it is not easy to find out that the same company is behind the municipal television in Orlová - iTVO¹⁵. The city's website lacks any information or contacts, nor are they listed on the TV's Youtube channel¹⁶. The fact that the TV belongs to Local TV Plus s.r.o. can only be ascertained from the company's website, where it lists all its city TV stations.

¹⁰<https://www.rrtv.cz/cz/files/zpravy/VZ2021.pdf>

¹¹<https://www.televize-pribor.cz/televize/>

¹²<https://www.pribor.eu/kontakty-a-media/mestska-televize/>

¹³<https://www.vhodne-uverejneni.cz/index.php?m=xenorders&h=order&a=detaildocumentsandimages&rwr=tvorba-programu-do-vysilani-local-tv-mestska-televize-pribor-2>

¹⁴<https://www.pohodamedia.cz/>

¹⁵<https://www.mesto-orlova.cz/cz/zpravodajstvi/itvo/>

¹⁶https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPQDf3iyUiehrLJjMPS_CaQ

Publisher networks, media groups

The media group A11, s.r.o., purchased a majority share in Regional TV CZ, s.r.o. in June 2022 from the Valenta's group Our media, a.s. Our media is a media company linked by ownership to Senator and regional representative Ivo Valenta. The portfolio of A11, s.r.o. also includes free local press, for example, it publishes the monthly *Náš region* and monthly magazines for Prague's urban districts.

Regional TV ČR, which covers all regions, cooperates with other regional TV stations and can be said to represent regional television broadcasting in the Czech Republic. According to its website, Regional Television cooperates with more than 100 local, regional and in-

ternet TV stations and broadcasts nearly 11,000 reports from the Moravian, Czech and Silesian regions annually.¹⁷ The A11 media group publishes only its own titles, while other publishers mix both the publication of municipal newspapers and their own free titles in their portfolio. Among such companies is Czech Home Mediahouse (formerly Strategic Consulting). The company publishes 48 titles. The Regional Publishing House operates in a similar way. It was founded from an advertising agency, the owner Jan Ondruš previously worked for Strategic Consulting¹⁸. These media groups have completely resigned from the pursuit of professional journalism; the goal is to sell advertising..

My řešíme vaši propagaci, vy rozvíjete váš byznys



Na druhé straně je vždy profesionál

Naši inzertní poradci jsou profíci. Ročně zpracují a administrují až 4 000 objednávek do 60 různých novin a časopisů. A to už je pořádná porce.



Jste vždy v pohodě

Trochu spolupráce od vás budeme potřebovat. Bez podkladů a pár základních informací to přece jen nejde. Ale zbytek práce už je na nás – zvolíme formu, graficky zpracujeme a navrhne vhodná média.



Dárek za vyplnění formuláře

Vkládáte do našich rukou propagaci vaší firmy. Je tedy fér, když vás hned na začátku odměníme. Získáváte 10 % slevu na první inzerát.

¹⁷<https://www.regionalnitelevize.cz/o-nas>

¹⁸<https://jirisochor.cz/2020/04/20/jan-ondrus-regionalni-vydavatelstvi/>

FINANCIAL RESOURCES OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL MEDIA

One of the main problems not only for local media in the Czech Republic is funding. It is difficult to grasp financial resources and economic relations in their entirety, so this chapter does not offer an exhaustive overview, but rather a few insights that have emerged from the data in the Treasury.

The analysis showed how TV stations strongly influence the regional media market. The following overview of funding shows that some regional TV stations receive sufficient funding, but the problem is the poor quality and unprofessionalism of their programmes, especially if we focus on news and journalism.

Private publishers of municipal newspapers, such as Regional Publishing or Český domov Mediahouse (formerly Strategic Consulting), also draw large amounts of public money - both companies have concluded 101 contracts worth CZK 146 million and CZK 62 million respectively in the State Watchdog since 2016. Local advertising is another revenue stream, with both companies offering massive sales departments instead of quality journalists and editorial staff.

Television

Television with the highest participation in tenders 2018-2021:

Television	Participation in procurements	Won procurements	Success rate
POLAR televize Ostrava, s.r.o.	28	23	82%
VČTV s.r.o.	11	8	73%
PRAHA TV s.r.o.	10	7	70%
TV MORAVA, s.r.o.	9	9	100%
ZAK TV s.r.o.	9	8	89%
JTV a.s.	7	6.	86%

An example of the symbiotic relationship between the media and local governments is TV Morava, which has received more than CZK 19 million from public budgets over four years, almost exclusively from the Statutory City of Olomouc and the Olomouc Region, and has a 100% success rate in the tenders it has participated in.

The fact that there is no system of regulation of the relations between private media and public institutions is evidenced by the very diverse situation in the regions, as well as by the amounts paid by the regions to private television companies. The amounts are in the tens of

millions of crowns. Of the total amount of 146 million paid by the regions over 4 years, 3 regions - Moravian-Silesian, Central Bohemian and Olomouc - spent 73% of this amount.

The funds shown in the tables below are the actual amounts paid as recorded in the Treasury. These are therefore not simply indicative contract amounts, but should nevertheless be taken as indicative. In particular, there is a lack of more detailed data separating advertising purchases from the provision of news and other media formats.

Most TV stations provide their services to multiple cities and counties at the same time

Case of POLAR TV - Top ten public procurers between 2018 - 2021.

Region	Total amount	nr. of TVs
Moravskoslezský kraj	57 067 704,55 Kč	4
Středočeský kraj	33 482 212,50 Kč	2
Olomoucký kraj	15 407 601,10 Kč	3
Jihočeský kraj	9 912 878,10 Kč	3
Zlínský kraj	9 619 328,00 Kč	3
Plzeňský kraj	8 536 096,58 Kč	2
Liberecký kraj	4 277 434,70 Kč	1
Královhradecký kraj	4 238 222,00 Kč	1
Karlovarský kraj	2 209 460,00 Kč	1
Pardubický kraj	503 569,00 Kč	1
Ústecký kraj	375 100,00 Kč	1
Kraj Vysočina	48 000,00 Kč	1
Jihomoravský kraj	-	-
celkem	145 677 606,53 Kč	

Television	POLAR Television Ostrava, s.r.o.
Statutární město Ostrava	15 890 696,10 Kč
Statutární město Karviná	10 876 690,00 Kč
Statutární město Havířov	10 255 996,00 Kč
Statutární město Frýdek-Místek	9 673 296,60 Kč
Město Nový Jičín	7 703 465,00 Kč
Statutární město Opava	5 504 090,00 Kč
Město Studénka	2 807 200,00 Kč
Město Orlová	2 393 864,00 Kč
Město Frýdlant nad Ostravicí	2 013 440,00 Kč
Město Bruntál	2 013 080,00 Kč
celkem	69 131 818,35 Kč

Print media

Example Haná press, s.r.o. - publisher of Večerník and the website vecernikpv.cz. It is run as an independent local media outlet. However, it is clear from Treasury data that one of the significant sources is public funds. In the period 2018-2021, Haná press, s.r.o. received CZK 5,794,390.00 from ten municipal authorities and their contributory organisations. Most of the payments are in the tens of thousands and are mainly for the purchase of advertising space. However, two institutions have larger contracts with Haná Press.

The Statutory City of Prostějov paid a total of CZK 2,257,605.00 in the reporting period, of which more than CZK 880,000.00 in 2021. In the Register of Contracts one can find a contract for the publication of the Prostějov municipal journal in the years 2020-2022 for CZK 718,200, which was increased to CZK 1,045,750 by an amendment in 2022, and at the same time they are part of the municipality's advertising contracts, e.g. for the pre-election supplement of the printed evening newspaper Život ve městě II.

The example shows the symbiosis between newspapers and politicians in the locality. It is obvious that the basic principle of democratic control cannot function in such a relationship and the newspaper does not fulfil this function. It also blurs the distinction between information and advertising. The delivery of editorial newspapers works on the principle that the commissioning party supplies the background and materials for the content, the „newspaper“ only processes them and sends them for checking before publication.

The financial connection of the media to public money, which is always decided by the respective political leadership, is one of the main reasons why poor quality and unprofessional reporting prevails in the regions. It is evident that the assumption that citizens will enforce quality media on their own does not work. This is where the state should better monitor the situation and also set rules.

ANALYSIS OF SELECTED LOCAL GOVERNMENT NEWS CHANNELS

local government news channels

As mentioned earlier in the text, the vacant space of independent media was mostly filled by media financed or directly published by local or regional governments. With the development of the Internet and the reduction of the technical costs of disseminating information, municipalities, cities and regions now offer - regional television broadcasts, printed municipal newspapers with free distribution to mailboxes¹⁹, mobile radio, additional news on their websites, and social networking sites are experiencing dramatic growth. **All formats have the same characteristics - the source and initiator are politicians or their press department, while those who produce the content often lack independence (they are directly subordinate to politicians) and/or professional standards.**

¹⁹not all municipalities have free distribution directly to mailboxes, sometimes the newspaper is charged and citizens can buy it at information centres, town halls, etc. E.g. Vysoké myto, Polička? Litomyšl? However, the flat distribution model still prevails.

Press Act No. 46/2000 Coll., defines the periodical press of the local government. In the case of other media and social media communication, publishing is completely unregulated. Television news broadcasting is regulated by the Broadcasting Council, but its ability to regulate the regional television market is limited.

For newspapers, publication directly by local governments is predominant, which simplifies monitoring and supervision of compliance with the rules. Even here, however, there are dozens of cities that contract out some or all of the publishing. In contrast, for television broadcasting, they operate primarily privately. Contractual relations bring additional problems and are highly non-transparent. Very often, local governments arrange in their contracts for pre-broadcast supervision of reporting, presenting the contracts as securing advertising, but the resulting programmes try to convince the viewer that it is a regular news programme - by naming the programmes, the style of the studio and the appearance of the presenter/moderator. In the case of printed newspapers, the contractual arrangements are even more varied.

Following an [analysis of regional news broadcasters](#) in 2020, Oživení sent four complaints about violations of the ban on election campaigning in the regional media and 9 complaints to the Broadcasting Council (RRTV) for failure to maintain objectivity and balance in news broadcasts purchased by the regions.

RRTV has carried out several investigations of its own based on our suggestions. A summary of all RRTV's actions is available in the 2021 Annual Report - <https://www.rrtv.cz/cz/files/zpravy/VZ2021.pdf>

Case study - Liberecká Televize - how does media supervision work in the Czech Republic?

We analysed the contract between the Liberec Region and Liberecká TV s.r.o, a local news company. Under this contract, Liberecká TV supplied television news coverage of local events. The contract was fundamentally flawed because it allowed the contracting authority to review and approve the video spots (labelled as news) before they were broadcast, thus allowing the political leadership of the Liberec Region to censor what would be broadcast. This is contrary to the provisions of the Broadcasting Act, which stipulates the obligation of the broadcaster to broadcast in its own name, on its own account and under its own responsibility and to be responsible for the content of the broadcast.

We contacted the Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting („the Council“) and brought this misconduct to its attention in November 2020. In May 2021, the Council decided to notify Liberec Television to take corrective action. We later reviewed the new contract between the above entities and found that the substance of the problem described remained unchanged. We contacted the Council again in November 2021, this time with a suggestion of the possibility of a fine for the offence. However, the Council only submitted comments, which the contractor (Liberecká TV) was obliged to accept. Although there was a new contract between Liberecká TV and the Liberec Region, the story repeated itself again and in April 2022 we contacted the Council for the last time. The Council eventually decided to initiate an infringement procedure, which is currently underway.

Municipal newspapers

Municipal newspapers remain primarily a PR tool, even though it has been 10 years since the press law was amended. Oživení has been monitoring the newspapers since 2006 - although some of the monitored criteria are changing - for example, the proportion of abuses of municipal newspapers to unfairly denigrate political opponents has decreased - the primary form of reporting on events is a laudatory assessment of the achievements of the currently ruling representation.

A pre-election analysis of 50 municipal newspapers in the largest cities in 2022 shows that more than a third of them still lack any space for opposition. Most cities and municipalities set out in their own rules that they will provide objective and balanced information in their newspapers. But they can't do that because the content is dominated by the political leadership. A monitoring of pre-election issues of regional newspapers has brought similar results²⁰.

[Pilot content analysis of municipal periodicals](#) was also carried out by PhDr. Jaromír Volek, Ph.D in cooperation with Focus. This analysis included a different sample and different methods, but reached similar conclusions and recommendations.

Questionnaire survey among editors of municipal newspapers

We also addressed questions to all the editors of the analysed municipal periodicals. 14 of them responded to the questions, two thirds of the respondents confirmed that the articles are subject to partial or full control of the municipal management.

Only 16% of editors have a journalism degree and 75% of them would appreciate professional training for journalists. Moreover, editorial work makes up on average half, sometimes even only 20%, of an editor's workload, so there is no room for better quality outputs. 63% of respondents would appreciate staff reinforcements in their work.

According to 9% of the editors, the content of the articles is fully controlled by the city management; 55% of the respondents answered that the articles are partially controlled. 18% would appreciate more independence of the editorial office from the city leadership. These conclusions correspond with the results of the content analysis of the newspapers on the high level of control of the content by the city leadership.

HOW MUNICIPAL NEWSPAPERS ARE CONTRIBUTING TO THE CRISIS IN LOCAL JOURNALISM

The problem of objectivity and balance of the information presented is closely related to the fact that the editorial board of the newspaper is appointed by the city council in 85% of the 50 analysed. In almost half of the municipalities analysed, the opposition is not represented on the editorial board at all, in another third

²⁰https://www.oziveni.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Infolist_kraje_2020.pdf

in such small numbers that they cannot have any real influence on the shape of the newspaper. The majority of the editorial staff consists of employees of the press department of local governments. The consequence is unambiguous - in most cases, there is a lack of professional knowledge of how to editorially process information in a way that meets the requirement of objectivity and independence.

All types of media that are published directly by local governments lack regulation for their funding. For municipal newspapers, this means that most supplement newspaper funding with advertising revenue. The latter is inherently focused on local/regional companies. For them, the newspaper offers a generous opportunity to advertise in a medium that is distributed free to all citizens in the municipality. This makes it difficult for independent local media, which cannot do without advertisers.

The voice of the readers, i.e. the citizens, has long been missing in the view of the situation of the municipal newspapers. Free distribution does not allow for readership feedback; it is not clear how citizens feel about the information they receive. However, we know from Oživení's consultancy work that all political problems are eventually reflected in the newspapers - either they start to function as a battleground for the leadership and the opposition, or censorship gradually worsens in order to maintain a positive image of the municipal leadership.

An example of considerable censorship is the newspa-

per of the city of Kladno and its inability to provide basic information about the dispute between the city and the Central Bohemian Region over payments for transport services²¹.

There are also bizarre cases where politicians publish their own publications that are easily confused with the municipal newspaper. In the case of the last municipal elections, the Krásné Letňany group, headed by billionaire Pavel Sehnal, sent out a replica of Letňany listy to mailboxes, presenting its own program. News server novinky.cz reported on the entire case²².

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE ROUNDTABLE - DEFINITION OF THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS OF LOCAL JOURNALISM AND PROPOSED REMEDIES

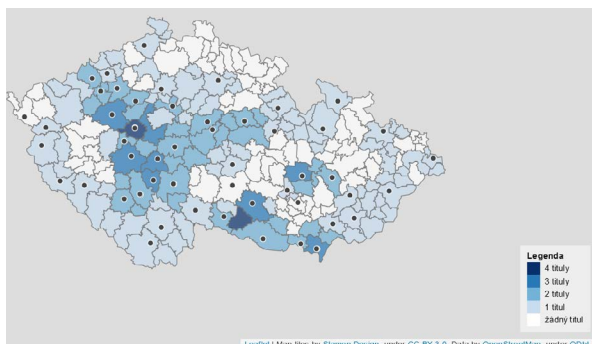
The project brought together journalists, editors, publishers and researchers in a roundtable to define the basic problems of local journalism and at the same time find consensus on appropriate measures to remedy the crisis situation. Consensus was not easily found and the following list of points was agreed by those present. Prior to the roundtable, everyone filled out a questionnaire, and we report the percentage agreement from the responses.

The „information deserts“ procedure

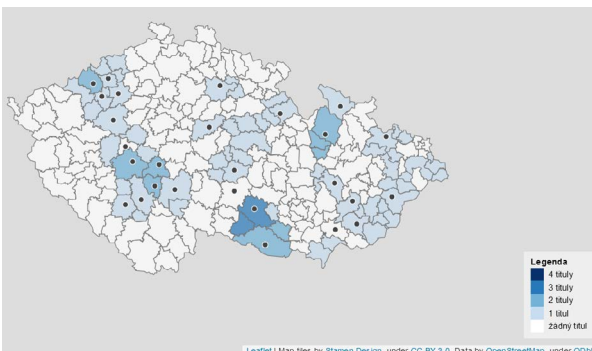
As evidenced by the [research](#) of Lenka Waschková Císařová from 2019, which she presented at the roundtable, the number of independent local media outlets has declined from 60 to 29 titles over the course of a decade. In addition, the place of traditional local media is

²¹<https://hlasnatrouba.cz/samosprava/Kladno>

²²<https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/domaci-miliardar-sehnal-zkopiroval-radnicni-mesicnik-v-praze-letnanech-a-vydal-v-nem-svuj-program-40407365>



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taken by chains (Nationwide regional daily prints), which replace local information with regional or national news. Thus, in many areas we do not find independent (i.e. not controlled by the local government) and local media (containing truly local information). The emergence of information deserts - places not covered by independent media - has resulted in lower voter turnout, more expensive public procurement and a lack of oversight of local politicians. The empty media space is then filled by media dependent on local government, which are often abused to promote the city's leadership and sometimes prevent pluralism of opinion.

Economic model, system of financial support for media

Publishing local media is not economically sustainable at present.

All participants in the roundtable believe that public funding for the media should be introduced. There is no clear consensus on the form of financial support. Over 60% think that state institutions should provide support to the media, while others would opt for private funds (such as the existing [Foundation for Independent Journalism](#)) or professional organisations.

Regarding the form of subsidy, 90% were in favour of a direct operating subsidy (as is the case in Canada, France, Russia and Austria, for example). From the indirect subsidy point of view, the optimal option seems to be a reduction in VAT on printing or a reduction in postal rates for periodicals. Alternatively, a combination of both types of support.

When introducing financial support to the media, the risk of purpose-built media must be guarded against.

Most of the experts present were in favour of linking financial support to criteria for quality journalism.

Low level of professionalisation, setting criteria for quality journalism and media self-regulation

The experts present agreed that the regions are overwhelmed by formats that fall short of the quality of news media and are burdened by interest pressures, ties and an opaque ownership structure. They also identified the low level of professionalism of journalists

and the lack of uniform journalistic standards as problematic.

Most of the experts present considered it desirable for private local media to set up their own regulatory mechanisms. There is no coherence between the sub-existing self-regulatory mechanisms, with journalists setting their own and publishers setting different ones.

Related to this is the requirement for common codes of ethics that would apply to all media platforms and contribute to overall transparency.

Over 65% of those present considered the low level of professionalisation of journalists to be a problem. This problem is linked to low staff capacity, lack of resources, and the low social prestige of the position of regional journalist.

Conflicting interests of private media owners, opaque ownership and ties, interest pressures

Under the Conflict of Interest Act, politicians are prohibited from publishing periodicals or broadcasting. However, the law does not cover cases in which a politician is not the formal operator of a media outlet, but exercises influence over it, for example through a trust fund. The management of online media is not considered a conflict of interest at all.

A common demand of the roundtable participants is to adjust the current state of affairs and to strengthen overall supervision of compliance with the Conflict of Interest Act.

Promoting cooperation between actors - creation of a platform for sharing

The participants of the roundtable unanimously stated that they lacked virtually any coordinated cooperation of professionals in the field of local journalism. Experts duplicate each other's research, do not share their conclusions and lack sufficient space to discuss the current situation.

Therefore, as a first step, we have created a common group to share outputs and inform each other.

Another common issue identified by participants was the lack of capacity for administrative activities and they unanimously supported the request for a joint European grant.

SLOVAKIA

NATIONAL STUDY ON THE CRISIS OF LOCAL JOURNALISM

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 paper network](#) regionPress, established in 1997 by the former Prime Minister and current Minister of Finance Igor Matovič. Newspapers have helped him build his own popularity and enter 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 paper network called Pardon.

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 already closed down their regional editorial departments 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 the 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 other things, to help strengthen 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 a 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 [led](#) by a new Director General since this summer.

Independent regional printed media

Our findings imply there are currently 39 independent printed regional titles available for over-the-counter sale. As for daily newspapers that have remained until present days, there is one Slovak regional daily Korzár covering the area of Eastern Slovakia (the 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 fortnightlies 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 nationwide 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 situation in parts of the regions is also strongly influenced by another big player, which is the publishing house Petit Press. In addition to the daily SME and the aforementioned daily Korzár, it also publishes several regional weeklies. The publishing house started buying these in 1997 and gradually created a network of regional weeklies under the single brand MY.

However, only 19 of the original three dozen titles are published today. The last time the publishing house closed its editorial offices was in Šali and Žiar nad Hronom in 2021. Despite rationalisation measures, other titles are under threat. Radoslav Blažek, editor-in-chief of the weekly division, described to us that recently they had to merge the editorial offices of individual weeklies into regional editorial offices.

While in 2019 there were 58 editors working in the weeklies, now there are only 41. On average, there are only two editors per newsroom (one of the pair, meanwhile, is usually the sports editor). The largest newsrooms sit with three journalists, but some titles have just one and share a sports editor with another editor.

MY's regional weekly sales have fallen by 16% over the past three years (2019 to 2021). Cumulative circulation has even slumped by 19%. Sales of the most successful weekly newspapers from the MY network have fallen to the 5,000-copy mark.

The reduction of editorial offices to a minimum means

that weekly newspapers cover more complex topics only sporadically and are unable to provide even and high-quality coverage of the region, which is usually made up of several districts. They therefore concentrate their attention mainly on the parts of the region with the best readership.

Similarly, the daily *Korzár*, which covers the territory of eastern Slovakia and remains one of the highest-quality regional media, is being downsized. Only two of the original six versions for Košice, Šariš, Spiš, Tatry, Zemplín and Gemer are left. Apart from Košice, the daily now only has an editorial office in Prešov.

Korzár's sales have fallen by almost a third in the last three years. In the pre-pandemic year of 2019, the annual average circulation sold was still 6,262 copies, last year it was only 4,260. The number of copies on sale (down 38%) and the number of subscribers (down 19%) also fell.

Situational survey in regional news media

Our indicative survey shows that the situation in other editorial offices of regional newspapers is no better. The three-member editorial staff (the weeklies *Pokrok*, *Záhorský večerník*, *Žilinský večerník*) is nowadays above standard in Slovak regions. Several titles are unable to support even one permanent editor. Two part-time editors make up the monthly *Terra Hírújság*, and three part-time editors make up the monthly *Zamagurské noviny*.

Five titles with a single content person were recorded (the monthly *Pohronia* and *Poiplia Reflex 24*, the monthly *Slovo Šaňanov*, the weeklies *Sninské noviny*, *Stropkovské spektrum*, *Kopaničiarsky express*). Such

titles are also published with a minimum circulation, for example, the aforementioned weekly *Sninské noviny* and the monthly *Zamagurské noviny* have, according to their creators, a circulation of 500 to 600 copies. Even the monthly *RK Magazín*, whose editor Anna Zábajňáková was nominated for the 2021 Journalism Award, has a circulation of only 1,000.

Several titles are teetering on the edge of existence. This is how Monika Nemčeková, the owner and editor-in-chief of the biweekly *Slovenská brána*, which is made up of two editors with cumulative functions, describes the situation. In addition to content creation, they also provide other activities related to publishing and distribution. The survival of the newspaper is also made possible by orders from town halls, to which the publishing house sells part of the circulation with content dedicated to these municipalities. Part of the content of the periodical even functions as a company newspaper.

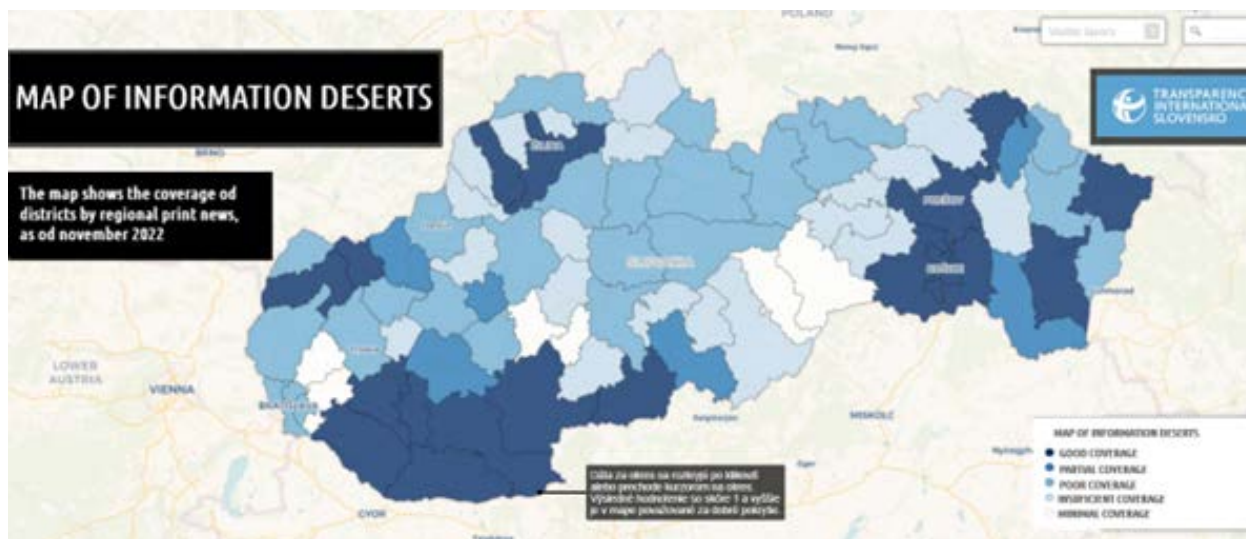
MAP OF NEWS DESERT

After considering the coverage of individual districts by news titles (we also verified it by communicating with representatives of the media themselves), their periodicity or language accessibility, we divided the Slovak districts into five categories (we counted the Bratislava and Košice districts as a whole city). We did not assess the quality of news coverage in this analysis; the methodology is described in more detail in the aforementioned analysis.

Six districts (Banská Štiavnica, Pezinok, Senec, Revúca, Rožňava and Žarnovica) ended up in the last category,

where events are not regularly covered by any print title. If we also add the category of districts with „insufficient coverage“, where as a rule no print media are based and only titles from neighbouring regions cover them partially, the „news deserts“ would extend to more than a third of the districts (26 out of 72).

The group with good coverage included 17 of the 72 districts. However, it was sufficient to have at least one daily or two weeklies systematically covering the news in a district to be included in the first category. Of the larger cities, Prešov, Košice and Žilina made it into this category.

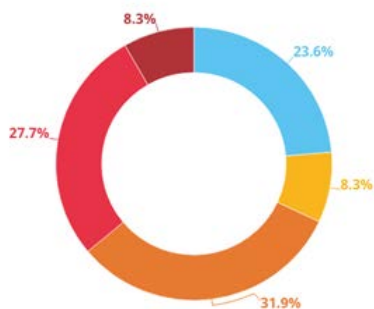


<https://transparency.sk/sk/mapa-printovych-spravodajskych-pusti/>

LOCAL MEDIA DESERTS

Rate of regional coverage by local newspapers

● good coverage ● partial coverage ● poor coverage ● insufficient coverage
● minimal coverage



TRANSPARENCY
INTERNATIONAL
SLOVENSKO

CASE STUDY: REGIONAL PRESS IN HUNGARIAN LANGUAGE

While the map of the 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 the total 72.

Among all Slovak districts, the best situation can be found in Komárno (coefficient equal to 1.6), as it can boast 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 regio-

nal daily [Új Szó](#) that has been coming out in Hungarian language since 1948. 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 the Pro Media foundation, which had been established, among other reasons, in order to strengthen mass media serving the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. It is a massive media project when compared with the situation in Slovak regions and it benefits from the financial support of the 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

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.

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 Šafanov	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	284153,00 €
Staromešťan s.r.o.	Bratislavský kuriér	47 494,00 €
VYDAVATEL'STVO 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 €

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

** Sum of revenues of analyzed new-spapers 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. 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.

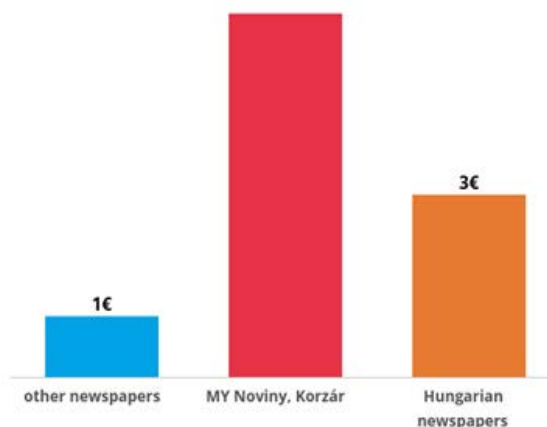
In total, the independent local printed periodicals under analysis made about EUR 11.4 million in 2021. We tried to estimate the revenues of the remaining 9 periodicals based on the average amount of revenues of other titles: the resulting estimated total amount of local independent newspapers is EUR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

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 an approximately 70 – 80% fall in 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.

LOCAL NEWS REVENUES IN 2021

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



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.

Evaluation of municipal newspapers

In February 2022, TIS conducted the [third objectivity ranking of municipal newspapers](#) that are published by the 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 the promotion of the local administration leaders.

The evaluation is available on the web: <https://hlasne-truby.transparency.sk/>

It is still hard to find contributions in local newspapers that would question the steps taken by the administration leadership. More than half of the 420 evaluated editions (59%) contained no critical opinion at all, which points to stagnation when compared to 2018 (58%). Almost two thirds of the 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 the evaluated city periodicals (71%) had an editorial board in 2021, while in 2018 it was only 55%. Half the local administrations (49%) adopted their own editorial statutes (one-third, 34%, in 2018).

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 the newspapers, usually under the mayor's supervision. Only one-third of the city papers declared editorial independence, although this could not be seen in the content of many of them.

In the period preceding the 2022 elections, we observed a worsening of the situation. TIS received a number of complaints pointing out specific forms of misuse of municipal newspapers. We have also evaluated pre-election editions of periodicals published by city districts

of Bratislava. Only one-third of the 12 titles showed no problems.

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

Local television

Several local administrations in Slovakia not only publish newspapers but they also own separate media companies. An example is Ružinov, the city district of Bratislava that a quarter of a century ago founded a business company that not only publishes the city district's monthly but also operates a television station 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 station. Our analysis has shown that almost a half (29) of the 65 television stations that are currently [associated](#) under the Association of Local and Regional Television Stations are in the ownership of local governments.

TV Sen

Part of the private local and regional television stations is tightly linked to financial resources from municipal budgets. An example is [TV SEN](#), a television station 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

TV SEN – revenues in 2021	
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
Total	133,381

Source: Municipality 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 income from municipal budgets form a substantial part of the television's revenues and the company is economically dependent on them.

Such a high level of connectedness to public sources deforms the quality of television news provided by the private television station, meaning it cannot be regarded as 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 the approval 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 a 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 rare for larger administrations to 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).

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.

CONCLUSION

In June 2022 TIS organised a round-table [discussion](#) in 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 go beyond the point where 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 the 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 a questionnaire dedicated to local journalism and the specific role of municipal media. Seventy seven 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.

Participants in the survey have indicated the 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 the 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 the importance of local journalism (42%) and to increase the 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 existential crossroads. 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 an appropriate economic model that would ensure their survival.

Due to the 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 newspaper 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 in-

formation about regional developments.

However, the 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 an environment where various interest groups often thrive. However, just like with municipal newspapers, this media space lacks the rules 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 the 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.

Recommendations

Apply a reduced 10% tax rate 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 the reduced VAT rate (10%, half the 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 the 20% rate. This favourable rate could be also extended to regional media freely available for sale.

This form of financial support for media on the 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 the unfavourable situation related to information deserts and regions with problematic coverage.

However, in light of the questionable quality of part of the regional media, the state support should not be di-

rected only towards existing titles. It would be desirable to also support the creation of new media projects focusing on good quality regional journalism. We also see the scope for the 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 the 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.

HUNGARY

LOCAL MEDIA MARKETS IN HUNGARY

Developments in local media markets are less documented than the changes on the national media landscape. However, the similarities are obvious: weakness of market forces, strong political pressure, and the presence of propaganda. The report summarises the main characteristics of the local media markets in the illiberal Orbán regime.

The financial viability of local media markets is much worse than the national market because of the smaller market size. If there were purely market conditions without any political pressure, it would still be very difficult to run a financially sustainable local media in Hungary.

As is well-known, political pressure is present. This is particularly striking in cases where national and local political power are in the same hands, so that there is no control to make political actors wary.

The commercial market is also captured by politics. Local or regional media, which are supposed to be commercial, are also typically owned by investors close to the ruling party (Fidesz). Typically, county newspapers and local radio stations are in this category.

MUNICIPAL MEDIA

Municipal media should operate as local public service content service of public interest within an organisational and funding framework that gives them editorial autonomy. Local media are primarily forums for the discussion of local public affairs, but it can also act as an independent source of information outside the territory of the municipality concerned, in the surrounding municipalities. The role of local newspapers in news con-

sumption is still important, but attention should also be paid to platforms that reach young people (YouTube, Instagram, etc.).

Mérték Media Monitor and Medián specifically asked in their 2020 news consumption research where the public gets its information on local issues.¹ Responses revealed that the most important forum for local news - cited by 62% of regular news consumers - is the local newspaper in their mailbox.

CHANGES IN THE MUNICIPAL MEDIA AFTER THE 2019 ELECTIONS

The local media was very strongly dominated by pro-government forces in the 2010s, and the fact that most local governments were led by Fidesz politicians contributed to this. As a result, the media published or financed by the municipalities also mostly spread pro-government propaganda. However, the political map has been thoroughly rewritten by the municipal elections of autumn 2019, which resulted in the election of opposition mayors in the capital and several other cities.

In some cases, the newly elected mayors found themselves in a rather peculiar situation. The local media openly supported Fidesz, it seemed impossible to work with them, but at the same time the purge and the firing of journalists did not send a good message, especially as this was the specific method of the pro-government owners of the media companies acquired in the 2010s. In the cities and districts of Budapest where the opposition won in 2019, the takeover of local media was far from easy, even in technical terms. In the 8th district of Budapest, the new mayor was confronted with the fact that the entire system of the editorial office of the mu-

municipal newspaper (Józsefváros) had been deleted and there were machines from which the back-up storage had been removed. Some e-mails were recovered, revealing that the former editor-in-chief had sent the articles to Fidesz politicians and asked for their approval before publication.²

So it was not easy for the opposition mayors who won in the former Fidesz cities in 2019. The propaganda-like operation of municipal newspapers and politically-motivated contracts made it difficult to create a democratic publicity.

CURRENT STATUS OF MUNICIPALITY MEDIA

The publication of municipality newspapers is still quite common, even if nowadays online portals and Facebook pages are obviously helping to spread local news. These local weekly or monthly newspapers are free of charge and are distributed by dropping them into the mailboxes of the residents.

According to the data from WhiteReport³, 1,010 municipal printed newspapers are published in Hungary. Based on the number of municipalities in Hungary (3,114), it can be said that a local municipality newspaper is published in nearly a third of the municipalities. In some places, several villages in a subregion jointly publish a newspaper, so the number of settlements covered by print media is actually even higher. Pest county, which covers the area around the capital, Budapest, stands out by far in terms of the number of newspapers published (170 local newspapers).

Outside of Budapest, there are a large number of local papers in the agglomeration of the larger cities, and

around Lake Balaton, a popular holiday destination. The number of newspapers seems to be higher in the economically developed regions. There are less developed areas where local newspapers are hardly ever published.

Outside of Budapest, there are a large number of local papers in the agglomeration of the larger cities, and around Lake Balaton, a popular holiday destination. The number of newspapers seems to be higher in the economically developed regions. There are less developed areas where local newspapers are hardly ever published.

WhiteReport also identified 108 local television stations, a surprisingly high number. This list includes small towns where there is probably a single enthusiastic person making videos, but no ongoing broadcasting. This list includes districts of Budapest, so there are several television stations from the capital alone.

The number of local news portals run by the municipality is surprisingly low for what is probably the most cost-effective way to share local news. The WhiteReport database identified 120 sites run by local government. Of course, in addition, almost all municipalities have an official website reporting on the most important local news.

It is almost certain that many local newspapers will cease to exist in 2023. With energy prices rising dramatically, local municipalities are facing serious financial difficulties and cost-cutting is likely to be an important objective everywhere. Moreover, with energy prices rising alongside paper prices, many municipalities are likely to stop or suspend increasingly expensive newspaper

publishing. It would not be surprising if municipalities were to invest more in online content service in the future, given its cost-effectiveness. Of course, this poses a number of problems in terms of reaching older residents who are not internet users.

POLITICAL BIAS IN MUNICIPAL MEDIA

We performed a content analysis of the newspapers of three different municipalities. The content analyzes refer to the same period, we examined the campaign period before the April 2022 parliamentary election. The essence of the investigation was how balanced the newspapers were, whether each candidate could appear in the campaign with the same weight. We found a really serious problem only with the municipality newspaper of Debrecen, where only politicians from the ruling party could appear.

Debrecen

Debrecen is the second largest city in Hungary, with more than 200,000 inhabitants and a well-developed industry. Since 1998, a Fidesz candidate has been elected mayor in every election, and Debrecen is in fact considered one of the most Fidesz-friendly cities in Hungary. The Debreceni Korzó newspaper is published 36 pages a month, with a circulation of 40,000, and usually uses the same layout. The newspaper has a classic magazine design, with well-structured articles, often illustrated with photos. It is striking that author of an article or photographer is not given, and the names of the staff are not included in the masthead. In addition to the full-page local, business and government advertisements, about half of the newspaper is taken up by local news about the municipality, cultural programmes, sports

and other reports. Paid PR articles can be identified by the (X) symbol, but this option has only been used for business-related advertising.

It was characteristic of the local news reports in all issues that the mayor, deputy mayors and members of parliament representing Debrecen were mentioned by name and in several cases the photo illustration was made about them. In all cases, they were government party politicians. In February, mayor László Papp appeared in the news 9 times, MP László Posán 4 times and the other MP Lajos Kósa 3 times. In March, László Papp appeared ten times, László Posán once, and Lajos Kósa twice, and in April László Papp appeared nine times, while the two members of parliament did not appear once. No local opposition politician was featured in the publications.

Debrecen Korzó wrote on page 12 in the March issue that Debrecen Television's news program will be shown every day of the week during the election campaign. In order to provide balanced information about the candidates, „Gyula Vida, editor-in-chief of the Media Center consulted with the representatives of the parties. Based on this, for example, a nominating organization can provide information about its program three times a week in Napszemle program. In comparison, the newspaper did not give space to the opposition representatives of the municipality to speak on any occasion.

This problem is not new, the independent local portal Debreciner, which is a civil initiative, has written several times about the Fidesz superiority of the municipal media in Debrecen. For example, attention was drawn to the fact that the mayor appeared in half of the news in Napszemle²³, while no opposition politicians appeared.

In the Debrecen 2030 newspaper, which was printed in 70,000 copies in 2021 and also distributed free of charge, the mayor appeared twelve times out of eight pages²⁴.

Budapest 15th district

The other publication examined is the municipal newspaper of the Budapest's 15th district, which has a population of nearly 80,000. It is a suburban district, quite mixed in character, with both old suburban areas and block houses built during the socialist era. The municipality's newspaper, the Tizenötödik was published fortnightly in the period under review, with 38,000 copies, and was distributed free of charge to residents' mailboxes.

At the end of 2021, the district's institutional structure was restructured, the publisher was changed, and a new editor-in-chief was appointed in 2022. During the period under review, the paper continued to follow the same formal elements as in the previous era. The content of the newspaper changed the focus; it has shifted from local events and local people to events and people of Budapest or national prominence and importance. The former President of the Republic, Árpád Göncz, had no known connection with 15th district, but articles about him and related to him appeared in the second, third, fourth, sixth and seventh issues. There was a report on the connection with the Göncz 100-

year programme (No. 2), an article on the presentation of Árpád Göncz's drama „Mérleg” at the local community centre (No. 3) and the crossword puzzle in No. 3 was also related to the former President of the Republic. An interview was published with Árpád Göncz's daughter, Kinga Göncz (No. 4). There was a report about the unveiling of an Árpád Göncz relief by local leaders (Nr 6). In the next issue, they reported on the exhibition of a tableau of Árpád Göncz on the fence of a social institution (Nr. 7).

The Tizenötödik has generally sought to provide balanced coverage, although the local politicians who run the district (who are in opposition in national politics) are significantly outnumbered in terms of the number of appearances. This is particularly true of the Democratic Coalition's elected mayor, Angéla Cserdiné Németh, her three deputy mayors and the district's MP. The 14 members of the election alliance „All for the Fifteenth”, which includes representatives of opposition parties and organizations, are also frequently featured in the news of the publication.

During the campaign, the newspaper was fair in the number of appearances by the governing party and opposition MP candidates, and in a special pre-election issue, all candidates were given the opportunity to introduce themselves.

²³Debreciner.hu (2022): A tudósítások felének szerepelője volt a debreceni polgármester, háromban meg is szólalt. [The mayor of Debrecen was featured in half of the reports, and he spoke in three of them.] September 29, https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/11413_tudositasok_felenek_dtv_papp_laszlo_debrecen_debreciner

²⁴Debreciner (2021): Tizenkétszer szerepel a polgármester neve a 8 oldalas kiadványban – Csak jóhírek minden debreceni postaládában! [The Mayor's name appears twelve times in the 8-page publication - Only good news in every mailbox in Debrecen!] August 11. https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/6562_tizenketszer_szerepel_a_polgarmester_neve_debreciner

Budapest 8th district

From a sociological point of view, the 8th district of Budapest is the most colorful district of the city, it has an elite part of the city center as well as a district with a bad reputation and problems. The mayor used to be a journalist, and he considers balanced information to be particularly important. The municipality commissioned Mertek Media Monitor for the second time to analyze the content of the local newspaper²⁵.

Compared to the analysis from two years earlier, political topics were pushed back by 2022. Most of the articles in the analyzed issues of the Józsefvárosi Újság were on cultural topics, accounting for nearly 30 percent of the volume. 29 public articles of the analyzed newspaper issues - 22.6 percent in terms of volume - mainly dealt with the events of district and local government politics.

The reduction of party political topics in the newspaper also resulted in a large reduction in the coverage of political figures in the period under review, both in terms of the text of the articles and the visual representation of politicians. For example, the amount of mentioning the mayor has fallen significantly, and the extent of his photo representation is not outstanding.

During the election campaign period, the editorial staff gave each of the candidates the opportunity to be introduced. As a result, no party or candidate was unbalanced in the Józsefvárosi Újság. This was helped by the fact that in the three issues published before the election, the candidates - apart from their introductory

articles - and other non-local, national politicians and parties were hardly ever featured. The results of the election were reported in detail in the 7th issue of the newspaper, with several articles and interviews, which helped readers to interpret the results from different perspectives.

It is interesting to note how often actors linked to local government appear in the articles (30 times local government was mentioned and 17 times a local institution or municipal company was mentioned). This demonstrates the interest of the newspaper in local political and district affairs, while the presence of institutionalised actors in metropolitan or national politics is much less frequent.

If we look at the appearance of political parties in the Józsefvárosi Újság, the dominance of Fidesz-KDNP is striking compared to the other parties. This can obviously be explained by the division of the opposition political spectrum. But it may be equally important that Fidesz-KDNP is an independent participant in the district's municipal politics compared to the other parties, the party was mentioned several times in connection with its district faction. The left-wing parties were often reported under the name of the joint opposition faction in the district.

The parties did not make equal use of the opportunity to present themselves in the campaign: some candidates gave shorter or no replies to the newspaper. The analysis found that none of the parties is portrayed in a negative light, with the newspaper writing about each party in a mostly neutral/balanced or positive tone; ne-

²⁵The analysis of Mertek Media Monitor was published on the 8th district municipality website. <https://jozsefvaros.hu/otthon/hirdetotabla/hirek/2022/09/elkeszult-a-jozsefvaros-ujzag-ujabb-mediaelemzese/>

gative opinions were found only in the case of Fidesz and, to a minimal extent, the united opposition coalition. Negative representations of the governing party are related to statements by opposition politicians assessing the election results, as well as to some local political issues.

Before the election period, the paper tended to focus on local politicians, but they were featured in a select number of issues, and beyond that, they were either not featured at all or only minimally. Overall, the number of mentions and the coverage of almost all political figures has decreased compared to the past.

INDEPENDENT LOCAL MEDIA PROJECTS

Maintaining independent local media is much more difficult than doing the same on a national scale. On the one hand, the small market size makes such a project much more difficult to run, and on the other hand, the personal sacrifice on the part of the journalist is greater. Exposing corruption in one's own locality inevitably brings one into conflict with the local political and economic elite, which can easily lead to conflict situations in the journalist's personal network. In a politically polarised country, it is therefore a particular sacrifice to manage a local independent media project.

However, there are examples of independent journalism workshops that have been operating in Hungary for years and can already be considered sustainable. The oldest such newsroom is Nyugat, which operates in Szombathely, a town near the Austrian border. Nyugat is the biggest local media outlet, it has a real newsroom with several journalists.

The other media outlets are smaller, they have typically one or two journalists, but they have an important role in the local public sphere. Szabad Pécs and Debreciner are good examples, they are independent news portals in Pécs and Debrecen respectively. The history of the two portals has in common that their founders used to work at the county newspaper, but when Lőrinc Mészáros, a friend and business partner of the prime minister, acquired Mediaworks publishing house in 2016, including the county newspapers, a purge began at these newspapers. Unfortunately, only in two cities did the fired journalists start new projects, and it is probably no coincidence that in Hungary it is only two big cities. Pécs and Debrecen are both university cities, and there are urban citizens who could be considered the target audience for such a newspaper.

In 2022, the Szabad Hírek (Free News) initiative was launched, coordinated by the Nyugat. Altogether, 11 local media have created a website where news from rural Hungary can be read. In the longer term, the participants hope that this will help them to act united in the advertising market, and that the cooperation will also help fundraising and successful applications for grants. The project is absolutely promising, it is very first case that independent local media outlets started a network building.

A dedicated section on the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty website has also been launched to provide news from local portals. This has fewer members than the above mentioned Szabad Hírek collaboration, but it is also a good opportunity for local media to reach a national audience with news from outside Budapest.

Another innovative initiative is the Nyomtassteis move-

ment, which aims to distribute content rather than produce it. The idea was inspired by the fact that in rural areas, especially in smaller towns, many elderly people live without internet access: they are mainly reached by government propaganda, as most of the printed newspapers, radio and television are linked to the governing party. Every week, Nyomtassteis puts together a short news summary of the most important news and tries to get it into as many people's mailboxes as possible, especially in smaller towns. The system is based on volunteering: anyone can print out an A4 sheet of news and put it in their local mailboxes.

Interviews with local media owners show that the future is very uncertain. In the April 2022 elections, Fidesz won by an unprecedented margin and brought general apathy among opposition voters. Many have turned away from public affairs and do not want to engage in politics. For the independent media, this means a declining readership, and it is doubtful how much readers' donations can be counted on in the future. A new phenomenon reported by some is the increased level of aggression in local communities. Journalists are under intense verbal attack, receive threatening messages, and the Nyugat's servers have also been attacked by hackers.

At the roundtable discussion organised as part of this project, participants also reported on a problem that is indicative of a general bad practice, but which affects the local media in a particularly negative way. A common experience was that even if an article or video report on a local issue is picked up by the national media,

the source of the original material is often missed. We hope that this bad practice will change and that more attention will be paid to local media representatives and their work. This problem is particularly acute because the big national newsrooms are already getting more attention, are better known and have a better chance for international grants. Local media should therefore seize every opportunity to strengthen their brand.

Independent local media are mainly based on small projects with low budgets, essentially depending on a few dedicated people to create a kind of democratic publicity in a city. Under the current circumstances there is little chance of change, and it is not worth investing in local media on a market basis. Maybe a stronger model of cooperation and networking can strengthen these local initiatives, it was also a main finding of the roundtable discussion of this project.

The news consumption research of Mérték Media Monitor and Medián asked the respondents about the consumption of independent local news²⁶. Local news portals independent of the municipality reached 22 percent of the population, and even if we look only at people living in the city, the figure is still only 24 percent. These important independent news portals do not operate everywhere, so in some key cities (Pécs, Debrecen, Szombathely) the proportion may be much higher.

²⁶Hann, E. - Megyeri, K. - Polyák, G. - Urbán, Á. (2020): Megfertőzött médiarendszer. A politikai tájékozódás forrásai Magyarországon. [Infected Media System. Sources of political information in Hungary.] https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Megfertozott_mediarendszer.pdf pp. 33-34

COMMERCIAL MEDIA ON LOCAL/REGIONAL LEVEL

Local or regional media can also operate on a market basis if the geographic market is large enough. In Hungary these commercial media outlets are typically owned by investors close to Fidesz.

The county newspaper is a good illustration of the high ownership concentration. All the county newspapers are now part of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA is the Hungarian abbreviation), which was set up by the ruling party in no secret attempt to centralise its media empire. The KESMA is far the biggest media conglomerate in Hungary (incl. print media, radio, television and digital media), but the ownership of the whole county newspaper market is probably the most valuable part of the portfolio.

There were some major developments in the free newspaper market in the last years. Metropol is the most well-known brand in this segment, but it has been closed for a few years. In 2020 Metropol was relaunched, and it is available at the metro stations in Budapest. It is far from the popularity of the 2000s; Metropol is part of KESMA and its content is a clear pro-government propaganda.

There was another project in the free newspaper market. In December 2019, Pesti Hírlap was launched in Budapest, but at first it was not at all obvious that it would become part of the Fidesz propaganda empire. Due to the epidemic that appeared shortly afterwards and the

change in travel habits, Pesti Hírlap did not really enter the public consciousness, but at the same time there were changes of ownership in the background and the editorial staff was also restructured. Its link to the ruling party became obvious. The newspaper gained national attention in the autumn of 2021, when it started open propaganda against the later winner, Péter Márki-Zay, during the opposition primaries.

At that time, the editor-in-chief and several journalists resigned²⁷. Publishing of Pesti Hírlap had been suspended in the summer of 2022, and it was not relaunched after the summer break. It was obviously not profitable in financial sense, and politically it was not really important after the Parliamentary election in April 2022.

Something similar happened with another free newspaper. In 2021 party's Mediaworks publishing house (part of KESMA) launched a family of newspapers called City7 in most opposition-led cities. It disseminated pro-government propaganda and it clearly wanted to counter-balance the effects of municipal newspapers. The political motivations behind the launch of City7 became clear in April 2022: the City7 papers were closed just a few days after the election.

In the case of local radio stations, independent players have essentially disappeared over the past decade, with the Media Council's frequency tender decisions regularly putting pro-government players in a position²⁸. A significant number of local radio stations are part of Fidesz-affiliated networks. There are only a few muni-

²⁷Nagy, G. M. (2021). Felmondások a Pesti Hírlapnál: távozik a főszerkesztő, Pion István. [Resignations at Pesti Hírlap: editor-in-chief István Pion leaves] 24.hu, 18 October. <https://24.hu/belfold/2021/10/18/pesti-hirlap-felmondas-pion-istvan/>

²⁸Mertek Media Monitor (2021). Four Shades of Censorship - State Intervention in the Central Eastern European Media Markets https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Mertek-fuzetek_19.pdf

unicipality-owned radio stations that are not part of these radio networks. Local radio stations in the network do not always outsource news production to the media service provider managing the network, but independent news production is the exception. In many cases, non-networked local radio stations do not carry out independent news production either, but buy their news blocks from MTVA. Based on the Mérték-Medián survey the local radio stations reach an average of 15% of the audience nationally, compared to 19% in cities²⁹.

As the above examples show, an important part of the media empire run by the ruling party is the propaganda disseminated to local audience. Obviously, it was a big loss for Fidesz that in October 2019 the political balance of power was reversed in several cities and opposition politicians were elected mayors. It is not surprising that the ruling party intended to remedy the effect of the 2019 elections by investing into local and regional media. They make no secret of the fact that they consider it important to have print media products and radio stations to target the local communities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Municipality-owned media, as local public service providers of content in the public interest, must operate within an organisational and funding framework that gives them editorial autonomy. Local media are primarily forums for discussion of local public affairs, but they can also be a means of partly compensating for the predominance of national government media. They

can also act as an independent source of information outside the territory of the municipality concerned, in the surrounding municipalities. At present, there is no data or knowledge about the role of which media play in local information. The role of local printed newspapers is the most important in terms of reaching the public, but attention must be paid to digital platforms that reach young people. Mertek has policy recommendations for municipality media.

Organizational issues:

- the appointment of the management of municipal media companies and the control of their operation may be regulated by municipal decree;
- a solution should be devised that creates appropriate procedures to ensure the diversity of local publicity;
- all management positions in municipal media should be elected on the basis of open tender;
- a municipal „media committee“ should be set up, consisting partly of members of the municipal council and partly of external experts; the external experts should meet the professional requirements laid down in the regulation (media, financial, management); local NGOs should be involved in the nomination of external experts;
- the „media commission“ invites applications from heads of municipal media companies;

²⁹Hann, E. - Megyeri, K. - Polyák, G. - Urbán, Á. (2020): Megfertőzött médiarendszer. A politikai tájékozódás forrásai Magyarországon. [Infected Media System. Sources of political information in Hungary.] https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Megfertozott_mediarendszer.pdf pp. 33-34

- the managers of media companies report annually on their activities, both financially and in terms of content;
- a statute should be drawn up between each editorial office and the management of the municipality owning it or the municipality company exercising the ownership rights, which should publicly and in detail regulate the relationship between the two parties and the independence of the editorial offices; a model statute should be drawn up for this purpose

Funding

- as municipal media are predominantly publicly funded, their management should be based on European requirements for the financing of public service media;
- task-based funding: based on a transparent estimate of the resources needed to provide information in the public interest;
- transparency: the principles for the use of the budget are public, all external contracts are open to the public without any request for information;
- each year, the heads of the media present a budget with a term of reference, which is discussed by the media committee and submitted to the municipal council;
- independent control: the municipal budget committee discusses the accounts of the municipal media separately each year;
- in addition to funding municipal media, municipalities can also set up a joint press fund to support local news media that are not owned by municipalities, on a normative basis, based on pre-defined criteria

Content issues

- it would be useful to carry out regular research, jointly funded by local authorities, on the role of the different media at local level, in order to decide how to allocate resources;
- consideration should be given to producing a joint page of national news for local newspapers, but otherwise local media should focus on local issues;
- the distribution of local newspapers should be extended to the villages around the town;
- dealing with substantive complaints: complaints received are dealt with by non-political members of the Media Committee;
- in addition to traditional media platforms, local content should be made available in an appropriate form on social media (YouTube, Instagram, Facebook) and exploit the potential of their interactivity;

communication on social media can be controlled according to public moderation principles

POLAND

LOCAL MEDIA AS A CONDITION FOR ENSURING THE RULE OF LAW AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

DEFINITIONS AND OUTLINE OF THE SITUATION

Local and regional media

In the Polish context, local media usually cover one or several counties (poviats). Poviats in Poland can have between 20,000 and 366,000 inhabitants. Local media tend to operate outside large cities, in counties with up to 150 000 inhabitants. Although there are quite rare exceptions to this rule. Local media **are local in scope and deal with local issues**. They rarely feature content that goes beyond local topics. Local media can range from the printed press to radio, television or internet portals.

If it is printed press, it is usually published **once a week**. In Poland, local media are mostly **owned by individual smaller publishers**. Some of them are affiliated to the of Local Newspaper Association³⁰, another part of the Local Media Association³¹. There are also publishers who do not belong to any of these associations. There is no obligation to belong, publishers do so to collectively improve the quality of newspapers, increase economic opportunities, learn, educate the public and conduct advocacy.

Local media should not be confused with **regional media**. The regional media are also published more often - as far as the printed press is concerned - than the local media. They are **daily newspapers**. Their content primarily covers large cities and provinces.

For historical reasons³², they are characterised by a very high concentration of capital, which in 2021 finally affected their independence from the authority they control. Most of the regional titles belong to the Polska Press Group. In 2021, the entire Polska Press Group was bought by a fuel company in which the State Treasury has a leading role. This is Polski Koncern Naftowy ORLEN S.A. (hereinafter: PKN Orlen)³³. At the time of the purchase, Grupa Polska Press comprised 20 regional dailies³⁴. The change of ownership raises concerns about the reliability in presenting regional and urban reality, depending on the political affiliation of those in power. After all, the CEO of PKN Orlen - Daniel Obajtek - is a man so closely associated with Poland's ruling party that he was even typecast as the Prime Minister of Poland. Immediately after taking over the media company, he introduced Dorota Kania - a journalist - to its Board of Directors. She was earlier associated with private media favou-

³⁰Local Newspaper Association <http://gazetylokalne.pl>

³¹Local Media Association <https://localpress.pl/>

³²Szynol. A, From political to economic monopoly - The case of regional dailies in Poland in Media and Journalism in the Digital Era (pp.25-40), University of Wrocław Publishing House Editors: Adam Szynol, Katarzyna Konarska

³³At the time of the purchase, the Treasury held 27.52% of the shares in the company. This may not seem like much, but it was the State Treasury that had a decisive influence on the management, as it bought the most shares and, according to the Articles of Association, had a privileged decision-making position (Articles of Association of 5 June 2020, Section 7 Article 11) and, as a result, had control over the company. At the end of 2022, following further mergers with other state-owned companies, the Treasury holds 49.9% of the shares.

³⁴Titles grouped in the Polska Press Group: Dziennik Bałtycki, Dziennik Łódzki, Dziennik Zachodni, Gazeta Krakowska, Głos Wielkopolski, Kurier Lubelski, Polska Metropolia Warszawska, Express Ilustrowany, Gazeta Krakowska, Dziennik Polski, Gazeta Lubuska, Gazeta Pomorska, Kurier Poranny, Gazeta Współczesna, Nowa Trybuna Opolska, Echo Dnia, Gazeta Codzienna Nowiny, Głos Dziennik Pomorza, Express Bydgoski and Nowości Toruńskie.

rably highlighting the activities of the United Right – the coalition in power since 2015, in which Law and Justice has a leading role. Thus, it can be concluded that there is practically no independent press at the regional level, apart from a few titles not belonging to the Polska Press Group - Dziennik Wschodni, Gazeta Olsztyńska, Dziennik Elbląski, Kurier Szczeciński, Super Nowosci. But there are also doubts about some of them.

All this makes the focus in this text **mainly on local independent media owned by smaller owners. However, some of the recommendations and considerations are also relevant for regional independent media.**

Local and regional audiovisual media

Also present at the regional level are the regional branches of the public broadcaster Telewizja Polska SA. There are 16 of them³⁵ and 17 Polish Radio S.A. stations³⁶. In addition, there are 115 local and regional television stations, mainly cable³⁷ and about 150 licensed regional and local radio stations³⁸.

LAW ON MEDIA ACTIVITIES

Press law

The activities of the press are regulated by the Press Law³⁹, which was enacted back when Poland was not a democracy, in 1984. And although there is a lot of criticism of this law due to its archaic nature, e.g. there are still references to means of communication that have not functioned for a long time; there is also a lack of clear regulation of the situation of the media online⁴⁰, there is also a lot of concern in the environment about changes that politicians may propose. Especially as this law is used, discussed and contains quite a few interesting solutions.

³⁵Regional TVP (public television) stations: Białystok, Bydgoszcz, Gdańsk, Gorzów Wielkopolski, Katowice, Kielce, Kraków, Lublin, Łódź, Olsztyn, Opole, Poznań, Rzeszów, Szczecin, Warsaw, Wrocław. <https://regiony.tvp.pl/>

³⁶Regional Polish Radio (public radio) stations: Polskie Radio (PR) Białystok, PR Gdańsk, PR Katowice, PR Kielce, PR Koszalin, PR Kraków, PR Lublin, PR Łódź, PR Olsztyn, PR Opole, PR Pomorze i Kujaw, PR Poznań, PR RDC, PR Rzeszów, PR Szczecin, PR Wrocław, PR Zachód. There are also sometimes urban mutations of these stations.

³⁷Some stations are repeated, others are very local, e.g. for a housing association. It is therefore difficult to say what the exact number is based on the concessions alone <http://www.archiwum.krrit.gov.pl/dla-nadawcow-i-operatorow/koncesje/wykaz-koncesji-i-decyzji/results,2,2,0,0,1,1,0,0,0,0.html>. It is easier and more accurate to assess this by reading the audience research prepared by the National Media Institute, pp. 5-9 https://kim.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Raport_Zasiegi-stacji_lokalnych-tv_20-12-2022.pdf

³⁸154 stations have „Universal/Local” status <http://www.archiwum.krrit.gov.pl/dla-nadawcow-i-operatorow/koncesje/wykaz-koncesji-i-decyzji/results,1,1,0,0,1,1,0,0,0,1.html>

³⁹Act of 26 January 1984 - Press Law <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=wdu19840050024>

⁴⁰Whether and how to register a portal or weblog <https://www.whitepress.pl/baza-wiedzy/21/czy-i-jak-rejestrowac-portal-lub-blog-internetowy>

Local government media

Laws affecting media freedom are also emerging in other areas. A problem affecting the functioning of independent local media is the emergence of self-government-run media. However, experts find no constitutional basis for running such media. A fundamental issue is the essence of rights and freedoms. Freedom of expression belongs to individuals, not to the authorities. It is the duty of the authority to create conditions for the realisation of freedom. Therefore, a local government authority cannot run its media, it is a violation of freedom of speech. There is no legal basis for this either. As Dorota Głowacka and Adam Płoszka point out⁴¹, apart from the fact that their existence violates Article 7 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, i.e. the principle of the rule of law - acting on the basis and within the limits of the law, it also violates the constitutional principle of the social market economy (Article 20 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland) and, in the case of local government paid media, Article 61 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland. This is because in such a case there is a chargeable access to public information.

Access to public information

This, in turn, leads us to another - important from the point of view of further considerations - provision of the press law. This is the reference of journalists to the law on access to public information, which, they argue, in effect limits their access to information.

Article 3a. With regard to the right of access of the press to public information, the provisions of the Act of 6 September 2001 on access to public information shall apply.

However this law, in the form in which it operates 21 years after its enactment, does not fulfil its role. There are more and more exemptions from openness, the procedures for obtaining information allow cases to drag on for years in the courts, sanctions for breaking the law do not pose a real threat to the authorities. As a result, journalists in their daily work cannot rely on a tool that theoretically should be one of their main sources of information⁴².

Prison for a word

As far as other media regulations are concerned, the biggest problem is the criminalisation of defamation, contained in Article 212 of the Criminal Code. This topic has been criticised many times, and the journalistic community, civil society organisations⁴³ and the Ombudsman have been calling for a change in this legislation for years.

⁴¹Głowacka D., Płoszka A., Publishing newspapers by local government units - constitutional doubts, Samorząd Terytorialny 11/2014

⁴²Judicial protection of the right to information - Summary of a seminar at the University of Wrocław, <https://siecobywatelska.pl/sadowa-ochrona-prawa-do-informacji-podsumowanie-seminarium-na-uniwerysytacie-wroclawskim/>

⁴³Article 212 - we call for the decriminalisation of defamation <https://siecobywatelska.pl/arttykul-212-postulujemy-dekryminalizacje-znie-slawnienia/>; Webinar: Why should defamation (Article 212) be deleted from the Penal Code? <https://youtu.be/aj3lsPyeTCL>

Relationship of the cited provisions to the upholding of the rule of law

The laws cited affect both the freedoms enjoyed by journalists and their independence, the controlling role of the media and their working conditions. They therefore have an impact on the quality of the rule of law and the condition of the local press, the subject of this text.

LOCAL MEDIA AS A CONTROLLING ENTITY

HOW MANY INDEPENDENT LOCAL MEDIA ARE THERE IN POLAND?

Thinking about the local media - including mainly the press - which have the possibility to exercise a control role to its full extent, we have created the following definition for our own purposes, which we use in our study.

An independent local media outlet is one staffed/operated by journalists who adhere to basic journalistic ethics and whose funding is based on diverse sources. If it obtains advertising, it comes from a variety of sources. This means that they are not dominated by advertisements from public entities or local government companies. In practice, this means that it fulfils a monitoring role vis-à-vis the authorities, evaluating their actions. It writes objectively, including critically. The publisher of such a title cannot be a Local Government Unit or any institution subordinate to it.

In order to identify such media, we considered that they are most likely to be concentrated in two associations - the Local Newspaper Association⁴⁴ and partly in the Local Media Association⁴⁵. In total, these organisations bring together around 90 titles.

According to the estimates of the President of the Local Newspaper Association, there are between 120 and 140 independent newspapers in Poland, including non-associated entities. However, without some kind of intermediary - in the form of a professional association upholding minimum rules or an in-depth analysis of the content, we are unable to determine which newspapers these are. We have a similar problem with possible independent radio and television stations.

We are therefore forced to assume that our study is subject to an error of underestimation. We have mapped all municipalities covered by local newspapers grouped in the Local Newspaper Association and all municipalities covered by our selected titles from the Local Media Association. https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1M_mlGnsg5Jn4R_t1qixeBPufjYAqodw&usp=sharing

We decided to complete this map and, in January 2023, we circulated a survey to civil society, asking citizens to submit information on the independent media⁴⁶. In less than 10 days, we received four hundred submissions with around 260 titles. These were mostly online portals. With our question, we also sparked a big discussion about what independence is.

In addition to the funding criterion of financing, we got other relevant factors. Issues such as the **ontent presented by the medium** emerged in the discussion. Among the criteria indicating independence were taking up topics submitted by residents, publishing texts sent to the editorial office, revealing matters inconvenient for the authorities, conducting journalistic investigations, checking the promises of politicians and critical texts about those in power, regardless of the political option presented.

⁴⁴<http://gazetylokalne.pl/lista-czlonkow-2/>

⁴⁵<https://localpress.pl/o-nas/>

⁴⁶<https://siecobywatelska.pl/niezalezne-media-lokalne/>

The subject of the independence of the owners came up and the question of whether they could be entrepreneurs whose interests depend on the municipal authorities, such as developers building facilities in the municipality.

Another issue was who creates content in the local media. Newspapers in which mainly councillors, people related to those in power, or people who preferentially use public property were shown as negative examples.

The discussion we triggered showed that it is not only important to identify places where independent media are lacking, but also to reflect on the quality of the media. Especially since it is not given once and for all and media independence must be constantly nurtured. Although the topic has been widely discussed for years, it still raises emotions. There is also a need for nuance - many of those discussing it were inclined to put the matter very radically. Perhaps 2023 will prove to be a watershed year for the question of independence. A great crisis has been announced for the media in Europe, especially the paper media. And Poland is no exception. And, as publishers point out, only quality media can survive it, although these too are more likely online⁴⁷. On the other hand, local elections are coming up, planned for spring 2024, and attempts to eliminate critical voices have already been made.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY THE INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Problem One - authority-run media vs. independent media

According to various estimates⁴⁸, more than 55% to 60% of Polish municipalities run newspapers that pretend to be part of the local media market. They write about local issues, just like the independent media. They perform mainly an informative role. The problem is that they present an embellished picture, are usually the propaganda of success and do not contain alternative content⁴⁹.

As was pointed out during the debate Independence of local media - how to support it?, they create a false impression created as if they were a real newspaper. They pretend to be something they are not. The Citizens Network Watchdog Poland investigated the content of these newspapers in 2018 and 2021. Following this study, in our report entitled What the newspapers of power hype about, we wrote:

They pretend to be the press, but do not meet the standard expected of the press. The authors of the articles are often not journalists but officials, if it is a newspaper run directly by the authority - and there are (...) 61% of

⁴⁷https://www.press.pl/tresc/74694,reuters-institute-prognozuje-zapasc-rynku-prasy-i-redukcje-dziennikarzy.-polscy-naczelnipodzie-laja-te-obawy?fbclid=IwAR1nfh1_yljDhE3HiibRxfnl7EkCY8yZj98rOsq8_qTBSIOc_U1n1NUOOPD4

⁴⁸Estimates from the Watchdog Polska Civic Network in 2018, which were subsequently verified in 2022, indicate that around 58% of municipal governments run their media (data after excluding missing data). The data comes from 80% of local governments. Nominally, there are around 1160 newspaper titles, 23 television stations and seven radio stations. In contrast, data from the National Institute of Local Government from 64% of municipalities shows that 55% of them run their own newspapers. https://www.nist.gov.pl/files/zalacznik/1669792175_BADANIA%20I%20RAPORTY%2014%202022.pdf Another figure (868 titles) is given by the National Library, but it only counts publications that have an ISSN number <https://www.bn.org.pl/download/document/1667482984.pdf> This figure may also include some periodicals published at the county level, which in turn were not counted by the Citizens Network Watchdog Poland.

⁴⁹What are the power newspapers buzzing about? https://backend.sprawdzamyjakjest.pl/media/annotations/mission/report_file/SJJ_gazety_wladzy_raport.pdf

such - they are often employees of the promotion departments, which is a good reflection of the tasks set for authority newspapers. 33% are employees of local government cultural institutions. (...) What reason would these people have to say that the inhabitants are dissatisfied with something, there are some fields of conflict in the municipality, some ideas of the authority have failed? Reading some of the (...) newspapers, we sometimes could not get rid of the impression that we would very much like to live in many localities. These towns were governed by enterprising, modern mayors or good and friendly mayors. They looked at their flocks of inhabitants with an economical eye. (...) Many male and female residents have no expectations of the local press, as they only know one that does not fulfil the role of the „fourth power“⁵⁰.

At the same time, as these media often even visually resemble daily or weekly newspapers, the public may regard them as part of the media market and media pluralism. Meanwhile, this phenomenon has nothing to do with pluralism.

These newspapers are unfair competition if they sell advertisements. And this happens quite often. Of the 463 newspapers that responded to us about selling ads, 113 confirmed that they do so (24%). What's more, they are dumping and selling ads cheaper than their competitors, after all, they don't have to reckon with the realities of the market. They also tend to be free material (83% of those 463 newspapers that answered the question). In January 2023, the editor-in-chief of the Kujawski Portal submitted a request to the Office of Competition and Consumer Protection to investigate whether the Bydgoszcz City Hall, by publishing its me-

diu, is not competing unfairly with private entities⁵¹. A few days later, the publisher announced that due to political polarisation, it was suspending its operations from 1 February 2023⁵².

However, when it comes to the power of newspapers to influence citizens' views, the power imbalance is not as great as it seems at first glance. Local government newspapers are most often quarterly, bimonthly or monthly - at least 71% of the 1160 surveyed. The independent press is usually published weekly. In the case of the dependent press, this is a relatively rare phenomenon - we identified only 15 weeklies and 26 biweeklies. At the same time, there are fewer paper titles of the local press than local government newspapers, and with the paper press crisis announced for 2023⁵³, the disparity could become enormous. The power media do not have to reckon with the realities of the market, and the pressure of the upcoming local elections will not be conducive to saving on propaganda.

⁵¹Ibid, p. 3

⁵²<https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/artukul/wydawnictwa-ratuszowe-za-darmo-nieuczciwa-konkurencja-uokik-skarga>

⁵³<https://www.portalkujawski.pl/region/item/24026-wazny-komunikat-zawieszamy-dzialalnosc-portalu-kujawskiego-od-lutego>

⁵⁴https://www.press.pl/tresc/74694,reuters-institute-prognozuje-zapasc-rynku-prasy-i-redukcje-dziennikarzy_-polscy-naczelnicy-podzie-laja-te-obawy?fbclid=IwAR1nfH_yljDhE3HiibRxfnl7FEkCY8yzj98rOsq8_qTBSlOq_U1n1NUOOPD4

Problem two - buying media goodwill

The second problem is the **discretionary nature of the commissioning of advertising and any paid material by public institutions and related bodies.**

This is a universal problem, not just affecting the local level.

An increasingly worrying phenomenon in Polish democracy is 'media buying'. Advertisements by local government and state-owned companies are targeted at selected media, regardless of their circulation and how this circulation is bought. Professor Tadeusz Kowalski's research shows this phenomenon at the central level⁵⁵.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of similar studies at the local and regional level, and an electronic and public register of contracts is not yet in place in Poland.

For the regional level, we made our own check in several cities. We sent questions for public information to three large cities - Bydgoszcz, Lublin and Wrocław. It turned out that advertising orders are inconsistent with circulation and coverage. The examples of Lublin and Wrocław are particularly striking.

In addition to the two newspapers published by the local government and its company, there are several media outlets in Lublin. The last two years have been marked by a struggle for the survival and independence of Dziennik Wschodni, an independent print newspaper with a long tradition. The majority owner of the com-

pany that ran the newspaper wanted to change the company's management. The journalists - who also owned shares in the company - expected that this would lead to a change in the newspaper's management (the majority owner is a local property developer), so they successfully blocked the change. The majority owner then decided to liquidate the company, brought in a liquidator and the liquidator sacked the editorial team. After a long struggle, the journalists managed to prevent the liquidation of the company. However, financial matters were going worse and worse, especially in the face of huge inflation in Poland and rising paper prices. The journalists continued to play a controlling role, so - despite a sizable audience - Dziennik Wschodni could not count on municipal commissions. This can actually be seen in the figures - while still in 2019 the Dziennik Wschodni received orders from the city hall for PLN 58,000, in 2020 it received around PLN 1,200 and in 2021 less than PLN 25,000⁵⁶. And it was in 2019 that the battle began in the city to build one of the green spaces, the Czechowskie Mountains (Górki Czechowskie). The bad financial situation of Dziennik Wschodni led the journalists to sell their shares in the company in autumn 2022. The new owner immediately changed the editorial team, to which the commercial staff went. Until December 2022, it was possible to write critical texts about the Lublin authorities. However, this possibility also began to run out. As the JawnyLublin.pl portal reported:

On Friday [9 December 2022], the paper edition of Dzi-

⁵⁵THE PERIOD OF THE UNITED RIGHT GOVERNMENT. Analysis of advertising expenditure of state-owned companies (SSPs) from 2016 to 2021. Appendix. Advertising expenditure of ministries and central offices in 2021. (Based on monitoring by Kantar Media) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359603356_OKRES_RZADOW_ZJEDNOCZONEJ_PRAWICY_Analiza_wydatkow_reklamowych_spoiek_skarbu_panstwa_SSP_w_latach_2016-2021_Aneks_Wydatki_reklamowe_ministerstw_i_centralnych_urzedow_w_2021_roku_na_podstawie_monitorin, <https://fundacjawolnosc.org/wydatki-urzedu-miasta-na-reklame-w-mediach/>; <https://jawnylublin.pl/o-tym-jak-prezydent-lublina-finansuje-lokalne-media/>

⁵⁶<https://fundacjawolnosc.org/wydatki-urzedu-miasta-na-reklame-w-mediach/>; <https://jawnylublin.pl/o-tym-jak-prezydent-lublina-finansuje-lokalne-media/>

ennik Wschodni (DW) published a recent article by Agnieszka Mazuś, until recently deputy editor-in-chief. It concerned the property development activities of the former chairman of the Lublin City Council, Piotr Kowalczyk. The board of the publishing house did not agree to its publication on the daily's web portal. In response, Paweł Buczkowski resigned from his position as deputy editor-in-chief.

The case was announced by the author herself, on one of the social networks. She also explained what would be found in her text:

- *The names of the people who attend the 'family trips' to Italy with President Żuk and Kowalczyk. They are Dariusz Piątek (property development) and Piotr Więckowski (speedway).*
- *The first plots of land in a field (today tightly built up with blocks of flats), which Piotr Kowalczyk buys while he is still Chairman of the Lublin City Council (and which he does not show in his asset declaration).*
- *The history of the school, where today one of Kowalczyk's companies sells expensive flats, sold by the City of Lublin in 2017.*
- *Another struggle with Lublin City Hall officials by neighbours of a plot of land on Karmelicka Street in the very centre of Lublin, which a developer wants to build up with tall flat blocks⁵⁷.*

Independence comes at a cost. And, as you can see, it sometimes ends up with the newspaper potentially losing its controlling role.

In Wrocław, on the other hand, municipal companies outright buy media to use in their political struggle. In November 2022, about a year and a half before the local government elections, the little-known (less than

3,000 followers on FB) Lower Silesian portal TuDolnySlask.info, run by a company registered in May 2022, published a text about Action City (Akcja Miasto), a Wrocław-based urban movement that is often critical of the actions of the Mayor of Wrocław. It suggested that the organisation had fraudulently obtained funding and alleged ties to Poland's ruling party, Law and Justice. The portal promoted it in social media. Apart from that, the portal did not write about anything relevant. It reported what could be found on official websites. However, readers' attention was drawn to the fact that two municipal companies advertised on the portal.

These examples are not far from the norm in many local authorities and have been observed for years. Statements by local activists and journalists indicate this. At the moment, there are no legal incentives to change the situation of media dependency with money.

Problem three - lawsuits directed against local journalists.

A third problem is lawsuits against local journalists. Even if they do not end in an unfavourable court verdict for publishers and editors, they effectively involve their time and money. The 2022 Case - Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe⁵⁸ has established a Polish group that collects cases of lawsuits by authorities and businesses against journalists and activists. The initiative is new and has included several cases of civil and criminal lawsuits.

At the same time, however, private prosecutions for defamation, under Article 212 of the Criminal Code, are a great threat. Poland regularly loses cases under Article 212 before the European Court of Human Rights. This is a systemic problem and can only be solved by changing the law⁵⁹.

⁵⁷<https://jawnylublin.pl/artykul-o-piotrze-kowalczyku-ocenzurowany/>

⁵⁸<https://www.the-case.eu/>

⁵⁹<https://siecobywatelska.pl/artykul-212-postulujemy-dekryminalizacje-znieslawienia/>

The perniciousness of this phenomenon, in the context of local media and their controllability, is perfectly illustrated by a story that ended in December 2022. It is described by [press.pl](https://www.press.pl), a portal dedicated to media problems⁶⁰. A local journalist, during the 2018 election campaign, described the activities of one of the candidates for Mayor of the city of Bytom. This candidate was the director of an indebted public hospital. Despite this, a PR company was hired to handle the hospital. The same company handled the hospital director's election campaign as a presidential candidate. For writing about this, the journalist was sued under Article 212 of the Penal Code. The case ended in conditional discontinuance. The condition was set by the court at one year. This means that for one year the journalist will have to be extremely careful in writing about Bytom.

Another story, which in turn shows how important it is for journalists to support each other, concerns Zamość. The *Tygodnik Zamojski*, which operates there and belongs to the Local Newspaper Association, described the financial decisions of the municipal company in Zamość, *Przedsiębiorstwo Gospodarki Komunalnej*, in 2018. The newspaper received a lawsuit from the company and was banned by the court from writing about it. This triggered a reaction from other newspapers affiliated with the Association, which published the detained article nationwide in one day. The company sued *Tygodnik Zamojski* for violation of the company's good name and won against *Tygodnik* in 2022⁶¹. In July 2022, the Central Anticorruption Bureau arrested the company's president, whose actions were described by *Tygodnik*⁶². At the end of December of the same year, the prosecution filed an indictment with the court⁶³.

Local journalists are exposed to lawsuits hindering their work as much as national journalists. Their cases are less well-known and their possibilities of receiving legal support are much smaller. Therefore, the protection of freedom of expression requires swift intervention in Poland.

Fourth problem - access to information

Another problem for journalists in Poland, including local journalists, is the silence of institutions. At the conference, the judicial protection of the right to information was mentioned by a journalist of national media - Ewa Siedlecka⁶⁴. The publisher of *Gazeta Radomszczańska* - Andrzej Andrysiak - spoke about this during a discussion on media reliability. In a comment on social media, the local watchdog from the mierzyn.pl portal - Grzegorz Krakowiak - summed it up most aptly:

Reaching out with an objective and not just an icky message is no easy task, and independence costs money, especially ,costs'. It is not only the cost of maintaining the portal (financially), but mainly the cost of the time involved in getting to the information, analysing it, confirming it and describing it. The pro-municipal media have it easier, because not only are they paid for it, but by publishing content in line with the authorities' expectations they often get the information at hand and are informed or even invited to important events, having priority in creating the message.

The independent media have to make an effort, strive for this information, sometimes several times. The publication must be absolutely reliable in order to be effective

⁶⁰<https://www.press.pl/tresc/74165,wyrok-dla-katowickiego-dziennikarza-za-zadanie-pytania-umorzony-warunkowo>

⁶¹https://www.press.pl/tresc/65980,_tygodnik-zamojski_-ma-racje_-ale-przegrywa-w-sadzie-z-miejska-spolka

⁶²<https://lublin.wyborcza.pl/lublin/7,48724,28666598,byly-prezes-miejskiej-spolki-z-zarzutami-przekrety-ujawnil.html>

⁶³<https://www.tygodnikzamojski.pl/arttykul/126724/zamosc-byly-prezes-zamojskiego-pgk-oskarzony-prokuratura.html>

⁶⁴https://youtu.be/nGKL_XwAqe0 From 20:00:00 to 22:40:00

*and credible, and this is sometimes difficult when the information obtained is sometimes incomplete, off topic or not there at all.*⁶⁵

Summary and recommendations

There is a whole range of minor issues facing the local media. We have selected those that are most relevant to the existence, integrity and sustainability of local media. Each of them can be solved by changing state policy or existing laws. Although these are not the only solutions and other measures can also be attempted on an ad hoc basis.

1. Regarding the first problem, the existence of the self-government-run media - to ban them.
2. When it comes to media buying by the authority - not only local, but at every level - rules should be introduced for the management of publicity and information orders from public bodies to external bodies. These rules must take into account the diversity of media and their coverage.
3. As regards the issue of lawsuits, Poland should implement legislation against so-called SLAPPs, drawing on the experience of the discussion taking place in the European Union. In addition, defamation should be decriminalised, a demand that has been raised for years. Before these changes are implemented, private donors, in cooperation with lawyers and civil society organisations, should provide support for journalists.
4. On the issue of access to information, there are a

number of demands from the civil society organisations on how to amend the Access to Information Act⁶⁶. Journalists' organisations should work together with civil society organisations to seek these changes.

5. The state should also adopt a public programme to support at least production, and the upgrading of independent media so that the activities of local media can continue. This programme would have to be designed to ensure that decision-making is independent of political sympathies.

⁶⁵[https://www.facebook.com/SiecObywatelskaWatchdogPolska/posts/pfbid0T6Pfx1XMZKc9bDEMxZJps9QcBZY56Jqm9nvf85HzMXcn-CD1wAAUEhjTSUvbbjvTwi?_cft__\[0\]=AZWZrvnNjr_F2HqIS8BcYq1wonrl9uj5F4bgPb5PAJ9aOC-AbOLfCfrfPEIsHlyoTmAxOri24vEigw2gy-NfvQ3ZlgA7dhZsV3kKlVwtL11RG8HUE3Cune0jRQ27EUi9v6FR3MRgUq7c_Ok6Dy5HYt4ZhkAvQqwzc5qpoI_0c0bkw4iCPD5-86_jlLGD0-ZXmzNXo78gx-tXAsCG5kfe3_BE&_tn_=%2CO%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/SiecObywatelskaWatchdogPolska/posts/pfbid0T6Pfx1XMZKc9bDEMxZJps9QcBZY56Jqm9nvf85HzMXcn-CD1wAAUEhjTSUvbbjvTwi?_cft__[0]=AZWZrvnNjr_F2HqIS8BcYq1wonrl9uj5F4bgPb5PAJ9aOC-AbOLfCfrfPEIsHlyoTmAxOri24vEigw2gy-NfvQ3ZlgA7dhZsV3kKlVwtL11RG8HUE3Cune0jRQ27EUi9v6FR3MRgUq7c_Ok6Dy5HYt4ZhkAvQqwzc5qpoI_0c0bkw4iCPD5-86_jlLGD0-ZXmzNXo78gx-tXAsCG5kfe3_BE&_tn_=%2CO%2CP-R)

⁶⁶<https://siecobywatelska.pl/pakt-dla-jawnosci/>

SUMMARY - THE SITUATION IN THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES

All partner organisations concluded in their local surveys and stakeholder meetings that regional journalism in their country is not in good shape. Printed regional newspapers are gradually disappearing in all countries, but their indispensable role as a watchdog has not been fully taken over by any other type of media. The vacant space is occupied by problematic actors, which directly threatens democracy at the local level. The same problems and their causes are found more frequently between the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Hungary has faced significantly more repression of freedom of speech and censorship than other countries, and media restrictions have been carried out with the active complicity of the Hungarian government. The situation in Poland is specific to the vastness of the territory and the subdivision, and the situation of regional media is determined by similar factors as in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

Gradual decline of local and regional independent media

In all countries, we have identified expanding information deserts.

In Slovakia, the⁶⁷ news desert covers more than a third of the country. TIS defines the optimal state as the full existence of at least one daily independent regional newspaper. Only less than a quarter of all municipalities achieve this coverage. TIS notes that the relatively well-developed regional press is now a torso and the current situation is very unclear. The space of traditional regional independent media is occupied by municipal newspapers and commercial advertising newspapers. One of the biggest players in this field is the regionPress network, which was founded by former Prime Minister Igor Matovič and the Petit Press publishing house,

which has gradually dominated a large part of the regional media market. Of its original 30 weeklies, 19 remain today.

Half of the regional print newspapers in the Czech Republic have disappeared in the last ten years⁶⁸. As recently as 2009, sixty regional newspapers were published in the Czech Republic, but today there are fewer than 30. The situation is very similar to that in Slovakia, with the dominant role in the field of regional print newspapers being played by the daily newspaper Vltava Labe Media, and the public media also having a presence in the regions. As editorial offices are being downsized, their regional content is disappearing. Research by Lenka Waschkova Císařová shows how most districts already lacked any independent regional press in 2019. Online news portals are not improving the situation much either, although some of them are trying to continue the tradition of quality journalism. One example of such local media is the Boskovice Ohlasy (Echoes.)

In Poland, only a few entities play the role of controlling independent media with a competent journalistic team. Smaller local media that have truly local coverage and deal with local issues are in a very different situation from regional media that operate in provinces and large cities and are characterised by a high concentration of capital. Most of the regional titles belong to the Polska Press group, which was bought in 2021 by oil conglomerate PKN Orlen, where the state has a big influence on the selection of the board of directors. The CEO of PKN Orlen is a person so closely linked to the Polish ruling party that he has even been tipped to be Poland's prime minister. According to Civic Network's assessment, there is virtually no independent press at the regional level, except for a few titles not belonging to the Polska Press Group. In Hungary, the commercial regional media are

⁶⁷Territories without access to up-to-date local news from an independent source

⁶⁸<https://www.lokalnik.cz/>

almost always linked to the ruling party. All the district's commercial newspapers are now part of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), founded by the ruling Fidesz party. Government surveillance leads to the creation of non-standard projects where regional journalists try to „activistically“ get information to the citizens that is in opposition to government propaganda.

For example, the Szabad Hírek (Free News) initiative brings together representatives of 11 local media outlets to create a website where news from the Hungarian countryside can be read. The Nyomtassteis movement, in turn, compiles a list of the most important news and distributes it to as many people as possible, especially in rural areas and smaller towns, on a voluntary basis. This is because it is based on the assumption that many elderly people who do not have access to the internet are under the exclusive influence of government propaganda.

The common denominator, across the V4 countries, is the filling of vacant space by media formats that pursue interests other than independent and balanced reporting of local events. These are various small business projects, often directly linked to public budgets. Especially in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland, there were similar phases of post-revolutionary buyouts of regional media by German owners and subsequent sales to domestic entrepreneurs who were motivated by interests other than providing quality journalism. Currently, the largest print media network in the Czech Republic and Slovakia is owned by Penta (in Slovakia already with a minority stake). In Poland and Hungary, the situation is even more complicated because the dominant owner is the ruling party or is directly linked to it.

In all countries, regional independent publishers are facing economic problems and a significant drop in sales. Consistently, the partner organisations also report that the editorial offices of the regional press are being rapidly downsized. The small number of editors is not able to provide quality coverage of the regions or to cover more complex topics. Civic Network draws attention to the worrying phenomenon of „media buying“. Advertisements by local government and state-owned enterprises are targeted to selected media regardless of their circulation and how that circulation is purchased. The Market Media Monitor assesses that independent local media depends on a few dedicated people and is not worth investing in on a market basis in the current circumstances.

A clear demand of all partner organisations is to set up a system of state support for independent regional media. This was one of the main topics at the local roundtables. Neither the unambiguous form of state support nor the control mechanisms have been unified, but there is a clear consensus among experts and across the V4 countries on the necessity of its existence.

DECLINING LEVEL OF CONTENT QUALITY

Economic problems of regional publishers lead to the downsizing of editorial offices, journalists are unqualified due to inadequate wages, all of which results in a decline in the quality of content. Since the overall agenda in a regional newsroom is covered by one editor on average (the other is usually sports), they usually resign from investigative procedures. In the case of municipal reporters, they are usually not journalists, but officials, so we often see that they do not follow even the most basic rules of journalistic work. Either because of ignorance or because of fear of possible reprisals, regional media do not engage in critical journalism and at best become lifestyle magazines.

Poland and Hungary have seen increasing cases of verbal attacks on journalists, threats and hacking attacks on entire newsrooms. Civic Network also describes the problem of lawsuits against local journalists. Local journalists are subject to lawsuits that prevent them from doing their jobs, as are journalists from national media. Their cases are less well known and their chances of getting legal support are much lower. Protecting freedom of expression in Poland therefore requires swift action, according to the organisation.

A common point across the partner organisations is the call for the creation of self-regulatory bodies and internal codes to set basic journalistic standards in private media. Linked to this is the need for greater transparency, such as publicly available contracts. There is also a need to develop a broader debate on independent regional media and to draw attention to this topic.

The influence of municipal newspapers and other media connected to local governments on the situation of regional media

In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, we have available a pre-election content analysis of municipal periodicals⁶⁹. In Poland and Hungary, the representation and distribution of municipal newspapers was mapped in comparison with the independent press, in Hungary supplemented by a content analysis of three municipalities.

In Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, municipal newspapers most often take the form of printed, non-selling monthly magazines that local governments distribute free of charge to citizens' mailboxes. In all countries, politicians dominate the content and there is a high proportion of newspapers that do not contain any opposing views. The Czech Republic has had a press law in place for 10 years, which gives reporters the obligation to provide balanced and objective information about local events and the right of councillors to publish their opinions. The law has had some, limited impact on greater representation of opposition views⁷⁰, but has not diminished the influence of ruling politicians on the content of newspapers.

In terms of coverage, TIS reports that municipal newspapers in the regions are completely dominated. There are ten times more of them than regional titles. In Poland, there are also fewer independent titles than those dependent on local government, but the independent press is usually published weekly and covers a larger number of municipalities. So the imbalance of influence on citizens' opinions is not so great. In Hungary, municipal newspapers cover almost a third of municipalities. In the Czech Republic, about 2600 local governments

⁶⁹results of the analysis of Oživení here: <https://hlasnatrouba.cz/statistiky>; Results of the analysis of TIS here: <https://hlasnetruby.transparency.sk/>; Results of the analysis of Civic Network here: <https://gazetywladzy.pl/>

⁷⁰still in the Czech Republic, in the sample of 50 correspondents of the largest cities, 22% of them lacked any opposition opinion.

publish the newspaper, i.e. one third of the total number. The Czech Republic is characterized by a high number of municipalities with a low number of inhabitants, in such municipalities it does not always make sense to publish a newspaper.

A consistently identified problem is the co-financing of newspapers through advertising. Whether the municipality manages its own advertising or has a specialist advertising publisher working behind it, the sale of advertising by municipal newspapers distorts the situation in the region. For independent media, this means an unequal position because they can never offer distribution conditions to all citizens of a locality. On this point, all partners agree on the demand to regulate or completely ban advertising in municipal periodicals.

Hungary has analysed the content of three municipal newspapers in municipalities where there has been a change in political leadership. Merték says that in the past, the very heavily pro-government-controlled municipal newspapers massively disseminated pro-government propaganda. However, the 2019 municipal elections have thoroughly rewritten the political map, with a number of cities electing opposition leadership. The handover of power has shown how strongly the propaganda works and how strong the links to Fidesz are, and the incoming opposition leadership has been met, for example, with the deletion of the entire archive. However, in 2022, 2 of the 3 newspapers analysed came out of the analysis quite positively, with a naked concern for balanced content and room for opposition.

Ideas about how to ideally address the problems of media that are linked to regional politics vary from country to country. In Poland, we can note attempts to follow the British path and radically restrict or completely ban the publication of municipal newspapers. According to Civic Network, this path is also supported by other actors involved in the debate on regional media. Merték Media Monitor advocates for legislative control and transparent selection procedures for editorial director-

ships. TIS is also advocating for legislation similar to the Czech press law and the definition of basic journalistic standards. In the Czech Republic, the situation is not currently open to the complete abolition of newspapers, but greater regulation is proving necessary.

Conclusion

It is quite difficult to predict how the situation of regional media will develop. A lack of interest complicates and slows down all ideas for solutions. This study has outlined some of the paths that each country plans to take, so it will be very interesting to see if any of the countries are successful.

