

VI THE PRIVATIZATION PROCESS

The month of March was marked by the termination of yet another privatization contract, this time in Pirot Television, which was reclaimed by the state after having been privatized in 2007. The contract was terminated at the proposal of the trade union and the employees of the station. The explanation of the termination decision says that, while controlling the records, the Privatization Agency established that the buyer had failed to comply with the contractual obligations concerning investments, business continuity and social program-related commitments, although having been set an extra deadline. The employees are now expecting the appointment of a representative of capital, claiming it is in their interest to continue working, while hoping for a partnership relationship with the municipality. The municipality also claims it is in their interest for the station to survive. The now former owner Milorad Pejic has publicly doubted in the ability of the state to run the business of TV Pirot. He requested from the Privatization Agency to allow him to assign the privatization contract to a third party. He says that talks were under way, but that the Agency ultimately terminated the contract at the request of the trade union. Pejic also claims he has evidence of having fulfilled the obligation to invest in the station, that the program was regularly aired and that employee salaries were far less late than claimed. In any case, the termination of the privatization contract seems to be part of a wider trend after the calling of the elections on all levels, characterized by increased pressure on the media and attempts by local power players to secure uncritical support by the media – especially public ones – in the election campaign. This battle for positions often leads to conflicts within ruling municipal coalitions. In Coka, for example, the representatives of the ruling Association of Hungarians from Vojvodina (SVM) have withdrawn from the editorial board of the local monthly “Hronika”, claiming they did not have any influence on the paper’s editorial policy. The Deputy President of the Coka Municipality Ferenz Balasz, a member of the SVM, claims that the editorial board was receiving finished newspapers for printing so late that there was not enough time to react to anything or make any changes. The President of the local council Czaba Pinter, also a SVM member, says that the latest (February) edition of the newspaper made it to the citizens without having been reviewed by the Board. In Pinter’s words, this is done on purpose in order for the paper to serve the agenda of one political party. Their coalition partners from the Democratic Party disagreed with the assessment that SVM did not have the mechanisms “to make the paper look like they wanted it to be”. The President of the DS Municipal Board and former President of the Coka Municipality Predrag Mijic interpreted SVM’s decision as a typical pre-election move, “when everyone tries to make it look like they have never been in power”.



The painful fact that local public media do not have any mechanism to protect their journalists and editorial freedom from local power players is most taken advantage of in the election campaign. The local authorities are so arrogant towards the local media that they often overtly refer to “mechanisms to make the media look like they wanted them to look”. Unfortunately, the journalists themselves are often unable to resist and hence we have the situation like the one in Pirot, where the television employees rejoice over being again in state property: instead of offering their services to the citizens as a watchdog of the government, they are “expecting a partnership relationship with the municipality”. All this paints an ugly picture about the distorted system of values and blurred perception of the function of the media in a democratic society.