



South East European Network  
for Professionalization of Media

# IMPERATIVE OF BOOSTING CAPACITIES AND REINFORCING EFFECTIVENESS

## Media self-regulation in North Macedonia

Marina Tuneva

Vesna Nikodinoska

### OUR MEDIA:

A civil society action to generate media literacy and activism,  
counter polarisation and promote dialogue



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This analysis studies the state of self-regulation in the media sector in the Republic of North Macedonia, focusing on key ethics documents and the role of relevant bodies in this sphere – the Council of Media Ethics in Macedonia (CMEM), the Council of Honour at the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM), and the Ethics Commission of the public service broadcaster MRT. The research includes a critical analysis of the capacities of the existing self-regulatory mechanisms, and of the challenges and good practices that arise from their operation, especially in the new digital environment.

The analysis indicates that there is a need for further strengthening of the human resources and of the financial and professional capacities of the self-regulatory bodies, in order to effectively tackle the challenges stemming from a changing media landscape.

Rapid technological development imposes a need for regular updating of the ethics framework in order to adapt it to the changing media environment, particularly in the digital sphere. It is also necessary to raise public awareness about the role and function of self-regulatory bodies, which would promote wider social engagement and responsibility of all stakeholders, including citizens.

The analysis led to the following conclusions:

- Ethics documents require continuous updating to meet the challenges of the new digital environment.
- There should be determined and established mechanisms to ensure the financial self-sustainability of self-regulatory bodies.
- The professional capacities and human resources of self-regulatory bodies should be strengthened through training and exchange of experiences, as well as the introduction of modern digital and other technological tools to facilitate their work.
- It is necessary to amend the Ethics Code for Journalists, Creative Staff and Other Employees of MRT with specific updates in order to strengthen the internal system of self-regulation.

- The public service broadcaster, in cooperation with professional media organisations, civil society and the expert public, should encourage the work of its Ethics Commission, through regular application of ethics documents, promotion of the complaints mechanism, training and sharing of good practices.
- Online media should be encouraged to join the Register of Professional Online Media, whereby they commit to responsible journalism and agree to have their content evaluated by self-regulatory bodies. This would allow the public to identify media that respect professional reporting standards.
- Self-regulatory bodies, media organisations and civil society should continuously implement activities to raise public awareness about the role and importance of media self-regulation in order to increase trust and encourage public participation.

# I.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, self-regulation in the media sector in the Republic of North Macedonia has played a very important role in the media system, actively promoting professional standards and supporting the development of independent media. The Code of Ethics of Journalists of Macedonia was adopted back in 2001, but self-regulation was in particular strengthened as a mechanism with the establishment of the Council of Media Ethics in Macedonia (CMEM) in 2013.

In the past few years, the political and societal conditions have been generally favourable for media freedom and critical journalism, in contrast with the period before 2016, when political power centres dominated the traditional mainstream media. However, the Reporters Without Borders' Report for 2023 indicates that the transparency of the institutions is at a low level, and the demonstrated political polarisation results in pressure on media from authorities, politicians or business entities.<sup>1</sup>

Internet media and social networks are increasingly becoming a growing source of information. Global trends have created numerous challenges for professional journalism and for the quality of information that citizens receive in the country. The key issues of concern for the media community relate to the erosion of ethical standards<sup>2</sup> and the proliferation of disinformation and misinformation, especially in the online sphere. The domestic media community is advocating that online media should be encouraged to respect ethical and professional principles. International organisations, on the other hand, point to the need to make a distinction between professional online newsrooms that publish original content and individual online media which copy that content.<sup>3</sup>

This analysis explores the capacity of self-regulatory mechanisms to promote ethical standards and to effectively respond to growing challenges, especially in the digital environment, as well as to promote media literacy. For the purposes of the research, key documents were analysed – ethics codes and guidelines for traditional and online media, public broadcasters, and social

**The key issues of concern for the media community relate to the erosion of ethical standards and the proliferation of disinformation and misinformation, especially in the online sphere.**

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- 1 Reporters Without Borders. (2023). *North Macedonia*. <https://rsf.org/en/country/north-macedonia>
  - 2 CMEM. (2017). *Samoregulacija ili regulacija na internet-mediumite vo Makedonija*. <https://semm.mk/attachments/21-08-2017.pdf>. Quoted at p. 2.
  - 3 Reporters Without Borders. (2023). *North Macedonia*. <https://rsf.org/en/country/north-macedonia>

networks. Interviews were conducted with nine interlocutors, of whom five are representatives of self-regulatory bodies, one from the media, one a representative of the regulatory body, and two media experts (see list at end of chapter). The research was carried out in the period from April to June 2023. This analysis is part of the regional project Our Media, implemented by partner organisations in the countries of the Western Balkans and in Turkey: the Albanian Media Institute, Media Institute Montenegro, the Press Council of Kosovo, the Macedonian Institute for Media, the Novi Sad School of Journalism, the Peace Institute from Ljubljana and Bianet (Turkey), in the period 2023-2025.



## II.

# THE BIG PICTURE: DEVELOPMENT AND OPERATION OF SELF-REGULATORY MECHANISMS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

The adoption of the Code of Ethics of Journalists of Macedonia<sup>4</sup> in 2001 is considered the first step towards the establishment of media self-regulation in the country. This document contains ethical principles and standards of professional and responsible journalism, and defines the role of the Council of Honour as a self-regulatory body within the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM). The Code still represents the basis for the operation of professional media and self-regulatory bodies, on which other self-regulatory mechanisms are built.

From 2011 to 2016, the political conditions in the country were not favourable for the operation and development of professional and critical media, and domestic and international media organisations indicated a “dramatic deterioration of the situation with media freedom”.<sup>5</sup> This was the reason why AJM launched the initiative to establish the Council of Media Ethics in Macedonia (CMEM) in 2011. The purpose of CMEM was to promote

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4 ZNM. (2001). *Code of ethics of journalists of Macedonia*. <https://znm.org.mk/en/code-of-ethics-of-journalists/>

5 ZNM. (2015). *Analiza na mediumskiot sistem vo Makedonija (preporaki)*. <https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Analiza-mediumski-sektor-2015.pdf>. Quoted at p. 5.

the responsibility of journalists and media owners for the application of professional standards, but also to prevent more restrictive media legislation that would regulate journalistic ethics by law.

Both self-regulatory bodies react to the violation of professional principles by journalists and the media stipulated in the Code of Ethics. The difference is that AJM's Council of Honour reacts to violations of the Code of Ethics of Journalists, while the Complaints Commission at CMEM decides on violations by the media.

While the Code of Ethics for Journalists has been in place for two decades and continues to serve as a robust framework for self-regulation, the emergence of new information and communication technologies, coupled with the rise of online media, underscores the necessity for its enhancement. In 2021, at the initiative of CMEM, the Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media were adopted,<sup>6</sup> and a Register of Professional Online Media was established.<sup>7</sup> Media experts consider the Code and the Guidelines as generally solid; however, they underline the need for their further and continuous updating.<sup>8</sup>

Co-regulation in the field of audiovisual media services in North Macedonia will be formally introduced with the latest amendments to the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (2013),<sup>9</sup> but legislation and self-regulation have always been guided to collaborate on some issues. Thus, for example, the Constitution and the laws, as well as the Code of Ethics, guarantee the right to reply and correction and the protection of information sources, and prohibit censorship. Hate speech is also part of the media legislation<sup>10</sup> and of the Code of Ethics. Thus, the regulatory body has the authority to sanction a media outlet that encourages and supports hate speech and discrimination, and can also contact other competent institutions. On the other hand, from its inception through 2021, the Complaints Commission at CMEM issued a significant number of rulings related to hate speech, constituting 8% of the total cases handled.<sup>11</sup>

Professional standards fall solely under the purview of self-regulatory mechanisms. They are also included in the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, but the regulatory body cannot impose a sanction when acting on a violation, but instead can turn to CMEM.

**Legislation and self-regulation have always been guided to collaborate on some issues. Thus, for example, the Constitution and the laws, as well as the Code of Ethics, guarantee the right to reply and correction and the protection of information sources, and prohibit censorship.**

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6 CMEM. (2020). *Guidelines for ethical reporting for online media*. <https://www.semm.mk/attachments/01-02-2021/Guidelines%20for%20Ethical%20Reporting%20for%20Online%20Media.pdf>

7 Promedia. *Profesionalni onlajn medijumi*. <https://promedia.mk/>

8 Interviews with Mirche Adamchevski and Snezana Trpevska.

9 MISA. (2013). *Zakon za audio i audiovizuelni medijski usluzi*. [https://avmu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Zakon\\_za\\_audio\\_i\\_audiovizuelni\\_medijumski\\_usluzi\\_mkd\\_1.pdf](https://avmu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Zakon_za_audio_i_audiovizuelni_medijumski_usluzi_mkd_1.pdf)

10 MISA. (2013). *Zakon za audio i audiovizuelni medijski usluzi*. [https://avmu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Zakon\\_za\\_audio\\_i\\_audiovizuelni\\_medijumski\\_usluzi\\_mkd\\_1.pdf](https://avmu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Zakon_za_audio_i_audiovizuelni_medijumski_usluzi_mkd_1.pdf), Article 48.

11 CMEM. (2022). *Statistichki pregledi*. <https://www.semm.mk/komisija-za-zhalbi/statistichki-pregledi/1049-2022>

Issues under the authority of the regulatory body include, among others, those related to the protection of minors in relation to the classification of programmes and the accessibility of programmes for persons with disabilities. These issues are part of the process of harmonising media legislation with the EU Directive on Audiovisual Media Services (2018) and other European standards, which is expected to take place in North Macedonia by the end of 2023. The legal amendments entail the possibility of co-regulation, especially in the area of protection of minors from exposure to advertisements for alcohol and alcoholic beverages and food with harmful ingredients.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, it is suggested that media outlets themselves have the opportunity to adopt a self-regulatory document, and if they do not do so or do not implement it, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AAAMS) would adopt an act with which they would have to comply. With the changes, the section of the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Services that refers to video sharing platforms should be also defined.<sup>13</sup> The process of harmonising media legislation is led by the Ministry of Information Society and Administration (MISA) in cooperation with the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AAAVS), other relevant bodies and civil society, with the support of the European Union. The aim, among others, is to strengthen regulatory and self-regulatory mechanisms to address the challenges arising from digital and online media.<sup>14</sup>

**Professional standards fall solely under the purview of self-regulatory mechanisms.**

In parallel with this initiative, the regulatory body, in cooperation with media organisations,<sup>15</sup> in March 2023 initiated the adoption of a Code of Conduct in the online sphere during electoral processes and referenda.

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12 Interview with Emilija Petreska-Kamenjarova.

13 Interview with Emilija Petreska-Kamenjarova.

14 MISA. (15 March 2023). *Azir Aliu: Mediumskite reformi po principite na EU zakonodavstvoto*. <https://javnaadministracija.mk/2023/03/15/mioa-azir-aliu-mediumski-reformi-po-printsipite-na-eu-zakonodavstvoto/>

15 Association of Journalists of Macedonia, Macedonian Institute for Media, Council of Media Ethics in Macedonia, Institute of Communication Studies and Metamorphosis Foundation.

### III.

# CODES OF ETHICS – FOUNDATIONS OF SELF-REGULATION

The analysis of the ethics framework in the country points to positive and negative aspects regarding the content of individual documents, but also in terms of initiatives for improvement, taking into account the challenges arising from the digital environment.

Table 1: **OVERVIEW OF ETHICS DOCUMENTS IN NORTH MACEDONIA**

NAME OF THE CODE	GENERAL OR SPECIFIC	YEAR OF ADOPTION OR POSSIBLE REVISION	IS IT IMPLEMENTED IN PRACTICE	WHICH SELF-REGULATORY BODIES MONITOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CODE AND CONSIDER COMPLAINTS
Code of Ethics of Journalists of Macedonia	The Code is general and its provisions apply to all types of media (broadcast, print, online)	14.11.2001	Yes	Council of Honour at AJM Complaints Commission at CMEM
Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media	Online media	2021	Yes	Complaints Commission at CMEM

Ethical and Professional Principles of MRT for Media Coverage of Election Processes	Public service	2016	No information available	MRT
Code of Ethics for Journalists, Creative Staff and other MRT Employees	Public broadcaster	2017	Incomplete	MRT
A Self-Regulatory Code of Ethics of Good Professional Practice in Digital Publishing	Individuals and companies related to digital publishing and advertising and operating on the territory of North Macedonia	2018	Yes	Advisory Body of Macedonia (Interactive Advertising Bureau)
Recommendations for Ethical Reporting on Children and Youths	All types of media	2021	Yes	Complaints Commission at CMEM

The Code of Ethics of Journalists of Macedonia<sup>16</sup> highlights the important principles that guide journalistic reporting, and applies to all types of media. This document emphasises the importance of publishing accurate and verified information, distinguishing between fact and opinion, as well as between news and commentary. The Code includes provisions aimed at preventing disinformation, although the term itself is not explicitly mentioned.

To address the challenges presented by the digital era, CMEM introduced the 2021 Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media.<sup>17</sup> This document highlights the importance of fact-based reporting from trusted sources to counter disinformation, discourage smear campaigns and prevent the publication of misleading or manipulative content.

Hate speech and disinformation have been especially present in online media and on social networks in recent years,<sup>18</sup> which is why the Guidelines also stress the role of online media in raising awareness about the negative

**To address the challenges presented by the digital era, CMEM introduced the 2021 Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media.**

16 ZNM. (2001). *Code of ethics of journalists of Macedonia*. <https://znm.org.mk/en/code-of-ethics-of-journalists/>

17 CMEM. (2020). *Guidelines for ethical reporting for online media*. <https://www.semm.mk/attachments/01-02-2021/Guidelines%20for%20Ethical%20Reporting%20for%20Online%20Media.pdf>

18 MIM. (2021). *Regulatory and Self-Regulatory Framework Against Hate Speech and Disinformation*. <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Resilience-Factsheet-North-Macedonia.pdf>

consequences of these phenomena and taking responsibility for user comments that contain hate speech. The document also contains provisions on the importance of verifying claims, especially those made by political entities, which will enable readers to distinguish between factual information and speculation or disinformation.

The Guidelines address, to a certain extent, the media's responsibility for comments posted underneath journalistic content on online platforms and their social media profiles.<sup>19</sup> The interviewed experts recommend that there is a need for clear and precise provisions regarding the responsibility of media outlets when they publish their products on social networks and the measures they take with regards to reactions from the audience, especially when it comes to protecting the rights of marginalised communities, such as the LGBTQI+ community.<sup>20</sup>

“From the work of the Complaints Commission at CMEM, it can be established that there are numerous challenges that we need to tackle, and they are related, above all, to the reporting of online media”.<sup>21</sup>

When it comes to the MRT Ethical Code for Journalists, Creative Staff and other Public Broadcaster Employees,<sup>22</sup> the biggest disadvantage pointed out is the mix of journalistic ethics with work discipline and with the rights and obligations of journalists arising from labour relations. In 2021, the Association of Journalists requested an amendment to the MRT Code of Ethics that would entail drafting two separate documents – one concerning the ethical behaviour of journalists, and the second for other employees (technical and professional staff of MRT). The AJM proposes to establish procedures for submitting complaints, as well as for the composition and working method of the Ethics Commission, which would be published on the MRT website. These recommendations were also made by international experts who explored and assessed the ethics documents of the public broadcasters in the Western Balkans.<sup>23</sup> No concrete action regarding these recommendations made by domestic and foreign organisations has been taken in 2023.<sup>24</sup> The public broadcaster has also adopted Ethical and Professional Principles of MRT for

The Guidelines address, to a certain extent, the media's responsibility for comments posted underneath journalistic content on online platforms and their social media profiles.

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19 CMEM. (2020). *Guidelines for ethical reporting for online media*. <https://www.semm.mk/attachments/01-02-2021/Guidelines%20for%20Ethical%20Reporting%20for%20Online%20Media.pdf>, Articles 18 and 20.

20 Interview with Mirche Adamchevski.

21 Interview with Mirche Adamchevski.

22 MRT. (2017). *Etichki kodeks na MRT*. <https://bit.ly/3uL62ZC>

23 Schroeder, R. (2018). *Examining and assessing editorial guidelines/codes of conducts in the public service media of the Western Balkans*. <https://europeanjournalists.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/PSM-Editorial-Guidelines-Report-EFJ-Renate-Schroeder.pdf>, pp. 10-11.

24 Spirovski, M., Todorovska-Kostovska, V. (2023). *North Macedonia: Indicators for the degree of media freedom and journalists safety in 2022*. AJM. <https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/MK-ENG-2022.pdf>

Media Coverage of Election Processes,<sup>25</sup> but there is no information about how they are applied.

The three documents do not explicitly mention media literacy; however, the bodies in charge of implementing the codes participate in various activities for its promotion. In addition, CMEM, AJM and MRT are part of the Media Literacy Network.

The interviewees also referred to the need for individual media to develop internal codes and rules of ethical behaviour and make them publicly available, which would contribute to improving their integrity and increase public trust.<sup>26</sup> There is no information to suggest that private media have adopted their own separate ethics codes.

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25 MRT. (2016). *Ethical and professional principles of MRT for media coverage of election processes*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/495694/Macedonia\\_Ethical\\_and\\_Professional\\_12\\_01\\_2\\_doc.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/495694/Macedonia_Ethical_and_Professional_12_01_2_doc.pdf)

26 Interview with Dragan Sekulovski.

## IV.

# OVERVIEW OF SELF-REGULATORY BODIES AND MECHANISMS IN THE MEDIA SPHERE IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Media self-regulation in North Macedonia is considered effective; however, the capacities of the three self-regulatory bodies (at the level of the profession and the public broadcasting service) could benefit from further strengthening, and their role should be further promoted among the general public.

Table 2: **OVERVIEW OF SELF-REGULATORY BODIES IN NORTH MACEDONIA**

NAME OF THE SELF-REGULATORY BODY/ MECHANISM	YEAR OF ESTABLISHMENT	FOUNDERS	SOURCES OF FUNDING	ACTIVE/ PASSIVE
Council of Media Ethics in Macedonia	2013	AJM, MIM and media owners	Donor funds	Yes
Council of Honour at AJM	2001	AJM	AJM	Yes
Ethics Commission at MRT	2017	MRT	MRT	Partially active



## 4.1. COUNCIL OF MEDIA ETHICS IN MACEDONIA

The Council of Media Ethics in Macedonia (CMEM) has been gaining increasing importance since its formation in 2013, which is evident from the rise in its membership and from the responsiveness by media in relation to received complaints about unethical reporting, especially from those who are its members.

“Media are not unconcerned (about the decision that CMEM will make) – no matter whether it is a moral sanction – (they) reply. The general assessment is that self-regulation has a significant effect, at least in order not to repeat the mistakes for which the decision was made”.<sup>27</sup>

The mechanism for submitting complaints has become more and more visible. The Complaints Commission at CMEM continuously receives complaints about unethical and unprofessional reporting across all media forms (print, broadcast and online), and subsequently issues adjudications and opinions. Adjudications are made for media that are members of CMEM, while opinions are issued for those that are not. The Complaints Commission at CMEM consists of seven members, of whom two are representatives of media owners, two are journalists proposed by the AJM and three are from public life – experts in the field of media, ethics in journalism, media law and other related areas.<sup>28</sup>

In 2022, the Commission issued 63 adjudications and opinions. The most frequent complainants were holders of public offices, public institutions and employees in state institutions, followed by civil society organisations and members of the public.<sup>29</sup>

“It had happened to the Council of Media Ethics in Macedonia and to the Council of Honour at the AJM that complaints were made by representatives from other areas such as the judiciary, healthcare and even representatives of religious groups, which means that self-regulation is recognised by individuals as well as organisations outside the media sector”.<sup>30</sup>

The Complaints Commission also receives submissions from authorised representatives of individuals who feel affected by a journalist’s work. They use the Commission’s adjudications in court proceedings as support for the petitions they send to the court. It has become common practice for judges to take into account the decisions of this body.<sup>31</sup>

**Media self-regulation in North Macedonia is considered effective; however, the capacities of the three self-regulatory bodies (at the level of the profession and the public broadcasting service) could benefit from further strengthening.**

**The Complaints Commission at CMEM continuously receives complaints about unethical and unprofessional reporting across all media forms (print, broadcast and online), and subsequently issues adjudications and opinions.**

27 Interview with Snezana Trpevska.

28 CMEM. (2014). *Statute of the Council of Media Ethics in Macedonia*. <https://semm.mk/en/sovet-za-etika-3/statute>

29 CMEM. (2022). *Statistichki pregledi*. <https://www.semm.mk/komisija-za-zhalbi/statistichki-pregledi/1049-2022>

30 Interview with Dragan Sekulovski.

31 Spirovski, M., Todorovska-Kostovska, V. (2023). *North Macedonia: Indicators for the degree of media freedom and journalists safety in 2022*. ZNM. <https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/MK-ENG-2022.pdf>

“This phenomenon speaks not only about the credibility of the adjudications of the Complaints Commission, but also raises a debate about the role of CMEM in the direction of promoting mediation and reducing the prosecution of journalists”.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the fact that CMEM is considered the most active self-regulatory body in the country, its commitment to continuous affirmation of self-regulation is limited due to a lack of resources.

“The number of permanently employed persons in the organisation is small, and the organisation relies on the work of associates hired on an occasional basis, but also on volunteer work by members of other bodies of the organisation”.<sup>33</sup>

This is primarily due to the tenuous financial sustainability of the organisation. CMEM primarily operates on project-based funding, leading to programmatic uncertainties in achieving its strategic objectives. Currently, members of the Council (media and media organisations) do not pay membership fees to participate in the activities of this body: “Media are highly polarised, there must be donor support for many more years”.<sup>34</sup> Media experts point out unequivocally that “a mechanism for self-sustainability of the body must be found”.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the continuous increase in membership of the CMEM, an additional challenge for the body is the lack of cooperation with some of the traditional media, especially with the national private televisions which are gathered in the Macedonian Media Association (MMA). They still show some resistance to cooperation with the Council:

“Part of the media community ignores the Council of Media Ethics. Some of the big televisions [do it] because of other, personal interests. When some of the editors are criticised, it doesn’t suit them and they have resistance to cooperation”.<sup>36</sup>

The interviewees believe that the Council should make additional efforts to motivate these media outlets for cooperation. A greater use of the mechanism of self-regulation is needed in order to avoid influence from the government and other power centres, as well as a wider promotion and acceptance of the Registry by more stakeholders.

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32 Interview with Dragan Sekulovski.

33 Interview with Mirche Adamchevski.

34 Interview with Snezana Trpevska.

35 Interview with Snezana Trpevska.

36 Interview with Mirche Adamchevski.

## 4.2. COUNCIL OF HONOUR AT THE AJM

In order to further strengthen the self-regulatory system, there is a continuous need to enhance the capabilities and encourage the activities of the Council of Honour at the AJM. The role of the Council is to ensure and promote professional and responsible journalism and to respond to violations of the Code by journalists. Early after its establishment, the Council was able to respond to complaints from citizens, as well as complaints against journalists who are not members of the AJM, but in 2010, the body was stripped of that competence. That was the reason for the decrease in the number of submitted complaints, which led to the body becoming passive.<sup>37</sup> Since 2015, the Council of Honour has regained the authority to decide on complaints filed against journalists who are not members of the AJM. The Council is composed of five professional journalists, who react to violations of professional principles by journalists. There is no analysis and information on how the Council reacts to violations of the Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media.

**There is a continuous need to enhance the capabilities and encourage the activities of the Council of Honour at the AJM.**

## 4.3. ETHICS COMMISSION OF THE MRT PUBLIC BROADCASTING SERVICE

For an effective and comprehensive system of self-regulation, self-regulatory mechanisms should also operate within the public service broadcaster. Self-regulation in the public broadcaster should not rely solely on a single document. Instead, it requires a framework for assessing the document's implementation.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, fostering the active engagement of the Ethics Commission within MRT and the practical application of the Code of Ethics is of paramount importance. Journalists' associations had comments and suggestions for the composition, functioning, visibility and recognition of the Ethics Commission at MRT as a body responsible for handling violations of the internal Code. This body is very important, because the public broadcaster should have its own control mechanism in respect of ethics rules.<sup>39</sup>

In 2019, domestic journalistic organisations and international experts pointed out that the functioning of the Ethics Commission should be improved and highlighted that the body included more technical than journalists.<sup>40</sup> Then, the managing director of the MRT Marjan Cvetkovski explained that it was a result of the urgency "to deliver at least a small success that there is hope for changes

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37 Tuneva, M. and Koka, F. (2017). *Etichko izvestuvanje na mediumite vo Evropa i Makedonija*. ZNM. <https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Eticko-izvestuvanje.pdf>

38 Interview with Snezana Trpevska.

39 Ilievski, D. (2019). *Reform or formality: The functionality of the MRT Ethics Commission*. ZNM. <https://znm.org.mk/en/reform-or-formality-the-functionality-of-the-mrt-ethics-commission/>

40 Spirovski, M., Todorovska-Kostovska, V. (2023). *North Macedonia: Indicators for the degree of media freedom and journalists safety in 2022*. ZNM. <https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/MK-ENG-2022.pdf>; Schroeder, R. (2018). *Examining and assessing editorial guidelines/codes of conducts in the public service media of the Western Balkans*. <https://europeanjournalists.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/PSM-Editorial-Giudelines-Report-EFJ-Renate-Schroeder.pdf>, pp. 10-11.

in the public broadcasting service”. He confirmed that “the functioning of the body can definitely be improved”.<sup>41</sup>

Regarding the larger media organisations, including MRT, media experts also suggest hiring ombudsmen, who could evaluate content before it is published or after receiving a complaint.<sup>42</sup>

It is necessary for the self-regulatory bodies to work on strengthening public awareness, as well as on the awareness of the journalistic and media community about their role in the media sphere. A good example of this is CMEM, which devotes numerous activities to informing and improving the capacities of the public in the field of media literacy, but also to recognising and understanding the ways in which professional standards are violated.

**Self-regulation in the public broadcaster should not rely solely on a single document. Instead, it requires a framework for assessing the document's implementation. Therefore, fostering the active engagement of the Ethics Commission within MRT and the practical application of the Code of Ethics is of paramount importance.**

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41 Ilievski, D. (2019). *Reform or formality: The functionality of the MRT Ethics Commission*. ZNM. <https://znm.org.mk/en/reform-or-formality-the-functionality-of-the-mrt-ethics-commission/>

42 Interview with Mirche Adamchevski.

# V.

## CHALLENGES OF SELF-REGULATION ONLINE AND ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

The adoption of the 2021 Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media was the result of long-standing efforts by the media community to encourage the professional operation of online media, because this was where the most frequent violations of ethics standards were noted.<sup>43</sup>

**Table 3: SUMMARY OF THE MAIN ELEMENTS AND PROVISIONS OF THE GUIDELINES FOR ETHICAL REPORTING FOR ONLINE MEDIA**

MAIN ELEMENTS	DESCRIPTION
Editorial responsibility	Appoint an editor responsible for all published content; hold accountability for content from other sources;
Public interest	Prioritise the public's right to timely, accurate, and objective information;
Protection of vulnerable groups	Handle reporting on sensitive topics with care and compassion; obtain consent before publishing sensitive information; protect identities and respect the privacy of children and victims;
Responsible coverage	Report on accidents, disasters, and court proceedings responsibly; avoid sensationalism and protect the dignity of those involved; present multiple perspectives and respect the presumption of innocence;

<sup>43</sup> CMEM. (2022). *Najgolemi prekršuvanja na Kodeksot zabeležani vo onlajn mediumite*. <https://semm.mk/novosti-5/2015-08-11-15-03-18/vesti-od-semm-1/1035-najgolemi-prekrshuvanja-na-kodeksot-zabelezhani-vo-onlajn-mediumite>

Respect for diversity	Respect ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity; avoid generalisations and promote inclusive reporting; reject hate speech, discrimination, and incitement to violence on any grounds;
Accountability and transparency	Avoid plagiarism and properly attribute sources; archive published content and provide an imprint with relevant contact information; moderate comments responsibly and adhere to rules for using content from other sources; moderate comments on social media platforms;
Journalists' rights and refusal	Journalists have the right to refuse tasks conflicting with the Guidelines.

Although only two years have passed since the adoption of this document, experts indicate the need for an upgrade. The Complaints Commission at CMEM points to several related challenges, first of all, to the work of online media, such as the issue of responsibility for the texts and comments of readers on social networks: “The audience reacts, and with these documents we cannot reply to their requests”.<sup>44</sup>

Another mechanism for the promotion of professional standards in online media operations is the establishment of the “Promedia” Register of Professional Online Media in 2019. Initiated by CMEM and AJM, in collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce of Macedonia, it has grown to encompass 130 online media outlets as of 2023. However, there is a large number of online media which are not part of the Register and that do not adhere to the ethical and professional rules. The trends for 2021 and 2022 show that the most violations of the Code of Ethics of Journalists are recorded among online media (about 90% of decisions). Article 1, which refers to the publication of accurate and verified information, was most often violated, followed by the article on distinguishing news from opinion, as well as the provision on hate speech and discrimination.<sup>45</sup>

Among online media, there is an interest in joining the Register, because it gives them credibility in the media community and in front of advertisers while also opening up opportunities to apply for donor funds. In 2022, in the initiative of CMEM and AJM, the criteria for joining the Register were tightened.<sup>46</sup> Thus, apart from the required publication of an imprint and the ownership structure, online media that would like to join the Register in the future will need to have at least two employees, regularly publish content and refrain from publishing political commercials and adverts. Rules for copying content among Promedia members were also adopted, to address one of the key problems in the online sphere.

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44 Interview with Snezana Trpevska.

45 CMEM. (2022). *Sporedbena analiza na zhalbi do komisijata za zhalbi na sovetot za etika vo mediumite na Makedonija za periodot na prvata polovina na 2021 i 2022*. <https://semm.mk/attachments/article/1035/Analysis%20UNESKO%20MK.pdf>

46 CMEM. (16 November 2022). *Usvoeni novi kriteriumi za členstvo vo Promedia*. <https://semm.mk/novosti-5/2015-08-11-15-03-18/vesti-od-semm-1/1034-usvoeni-novi-kriteriumi-za-chlenstvo-vo-promedia>

## 5.1. CASE STUDY: CODE OF CONDUCT ONLINE DURING ELECTORAL PROCESSES AND REFERENDA

In view of parliamentary and presidential elections to be held in North Macedonia in 2024, the regulatory body Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AAVMS) in cooperation with media organisations<sup>47</sup> proposed the adoption of a Code of Conduct online during election processes and referenda. This initiative was prompted, among other things, by “the increasing use and influence of social networks on election cycles, as well as the consequences of the circulation of incomplete, inaccurate or misinformation, especially online”.<sup>48</sup> The document contains guidelines and standards for fair, ethical and responsible behaviour of political parties and candidates, which, among other things, should refrain from intentionally creating and spreading incorrect or incomplete information or misinformation and not use automated structures (bots and trolls) for the orchestrated spread of disinformation and manipulation on social networks.

Compliance would be on a voluntary basis and would not be a substitute for the existing or future legal rules and regulations, but would refer to the individual responsibility of the entities concerned. The document was still being drafted in a working version as of June 2023.

## 5.2. CASE STUDY: HATE SPEECH IN USERS' COMMENTS TO A PUBLISHED TEXT

The Complaints Commission at CMEM considered a case of violation of Article 10 of the Code of Ethics, which pertains to hate speech. Although there were no violations of the article in the published text,<sup>49</sup> in the comments below the posted text on the media outlet's profile on social networks, hate speech towards the LGBT+ community was noted. The members of the Commission were divided on the issue.

Due to the obsolescence of the Code of Ethics of Journalists and the insufficient precision of some of its provisions, experts believe that both the Code and the Guidelines should be considered more widely and interpreted in connection.<sup>50</sup>

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47 Association of Journalists of Macedonia, Macedonian Institute for Media, Council of Media Ethics in Macedonia, Institute of Communication Studies and Metamorphosis Foundation.

48 AAVMS, AJM, MIM, CMEM, ICS and Metamorphosis. The Code was under preparation as of June 2023.

49 Article 10 of the Guidelines states that the media outlet is responsible for comments below the text published on the media outlet's profile on social networks.

50 Interview with Snezana Trpevska.



## VI.

# CHALLENGES FOR SELF-REGULATION IN THE PUBLIC BROADCASTING SERVICE

The public broadcasting service MRT is among the few media entities in North Macedonia that have a Code of Ethics.<sup>51</sup> This Code outlines ethical reporting guidelines as well as standards for professional and responsible conduct by journalists, creative teams and all employees of the public broadcasting service.

The establishment of self-regulatory mechanisms within the public broadcaster was the result of political negotiations and the need for media reforms that occurred after a longer period of instrumentalisation of the media by the political elites which eased in 2017. The Code of Ethics was initially criticised by the journalistic community due to its imprecise and excessive content.<sup>52</sup> However, it contains rules that are correlated with the International Federation of Journalists and the Code of Ethics of Journalists of Macedonia.

The document should be upgraded and adapted to reflect new information, communication and technological trends, but also to enable its effective application in practice. The members of the Ethics Commission point out the sections of the guidelines for the digital environment as an opportunity for improvement.<sup>53</sup>

“Non-linear services should be added to our Code of Ethics, if we aim to improve our website... [which is] part of the Strategy for the work of the MRT. This means we need to upgrade the Code as well. Perhaps we should also allow comments, but it should be controlled in order

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51 MRT. (2017). *Etichki kodeks na MRT*. <https://bit.ly/3uL62ZC>

52 Spirovski, M., Todorovska-Kostovska, V. (2023). *North Macedonia: Indicators for the degree of media freedom and journalists safety in 2022*. ZNM. <https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/MK-ENG-2022.pdf>

53 Interview with representatives of the MRT Ethics Commission.



to prevent publication of hate speech, personal attacks, public smear campaigns, etc.”<sup>54</sup>

Although the public broadcaster has been working more professionally in recent years than before, experts point out that the internal self-regulatory system needs to be strengthened. The Ethics Commission adjudicates complaints from both employees and the public regarding unethical and unprofessional reporting. From its inception through 2023, the Commission has processed a total of eight complaints: two from the general public and six from the broadcaster’s own employees.<sup>55</sup>

“The mechanism should be promoted. MRT should broadcast a video that informs the public about the possibility to send suggestions and comments and submit a complaint. In addition, we should also publish the email address, and we also have an imprint in all the languages in which MRT broadcasts programmes”.<sup>56</sup>

For the last year, this body has been working with five members instead of of the planned seven, and the reason these positions have not been filled is a lack of interest among the employees.<sup>57</sup>

To strengthen the capacities of the MRT Ethics Commission there is a need for training that will allow the members of this body to exchange experiences with colleagues from other countries and to find effective solutions to the problems they face.

The public broadcaster needs additional financial, professional and human resources to strengthen these components in order to enable greater transparency in its work, as well as the involvement of citizens in the creation and evaluation of the programme it broadcasts.

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## 6.1. CASE STUDY: VIOLATION OF ETHICS RULES ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

The first complaint considered by the Ethics Commission was initiated against a public broadcaster employee in 2019 due to their inappropriate behaviour on social networks. The Commission found a violation of three articles of the Code of Ethics, which refer to respecting the reputation and identity of MRT, personal and professional values, and “emphasising one’s public function at MRT while engaging in private matters”. The Commission established that the employee, with their posts on a social network, devalued the reputation of the broadcaster itself and abused it for personal gain.<sup>58</sup>

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54 Interview with representatives of the MRT Ethics Commission.

55 Interview with representatives of the MRT Ethics Commission.

56 Interview with representatives of the MRT Ethics Commission.

57 Interview with representatives of the MRT Ethics Commission.

58 Interview with representatives of the MRT Ethics Commission.

## VII.

# GOOD PRACTICES OF SELF-REGULATION IN NORTH MACEDONIA

In recent years, the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia has vigorously pursued initiatives to combat hate speech in the media and online platforms. In a pioneering effort for the country, it sought to bring together all pertinent stakeholders with expertise in this area, culminating in the formation of the Network Against Hate Speech in Media and Internet in 2018.<sup>59</sup> The Network unites various stakeholders, including civil society representatives (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, Coalition Margins, Metamorphosis Foundation, Institute for Research of Societal Development–RESIS and the Centre for Intercultural Dialogue), the expert media community (AJM, Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers, Institute of Communication Studies, MIM, Media Development Centre), regulatory bodies (Ombudsman, Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services) and the institutions (Ministry of Interior, Ministry for Information Society and Administration, the then Cabinet of the Minister without Portfolio responsible for Communication, Accountability and Transparency, and the Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors). This represents a significant step in creating a comprehensive framework for tackling hate speech in the media and online. The Network is also included in the Action Plan for the Strategy for One Society and Interculturalism.<sup>60</sup> The members of the Network signed a Declaration against Hate Speech in Media and Online.<sup>61</sup> The objectives of the Network are also supported with the membership of CMEM in the Media Literacy Network.

An initiative that has found wide support and involvement by the professional media community is the establishment of the Registry of Professional Online

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59 CMEM. (2019). *Formirana Mreža za borba protiv govor na omraza vo mediumite*. <https://semm.mk/soopshtenija/598-formirana-mrezha-za-borba-protiv-govor-na-omraza-vo-mediumite>

60 Government of North Macedonia. (2019). *Akciski plan strategija edno opshtestvo*. [https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/strategii/akciskiplan\\_strategija\\_edno\\_opshtestvo\\_24.10.2019.xlsb](https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/strategii/akciskiplan_strategija_edno_opshtestvo_24.10.2019.xlsb)

61 CMEM. (2019). *Deklaracija protiv govorot na omraza vo mediumite i internetot*. <https://semm.mk/attachments/deklaracija.pdf>

Media<sup>62</sup> by CMEM, the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) and the Chamber of Commerce. The purpose of the Register is to inform the public, as well as other relevant stakeholders, about internet portals that are guided by ethical and professional standards in journalism. Joining the register implies compliance with agreed standards in the work of a media outlet, and if a certain media repeatedly violates ethical and professional standards in reporting, the Management Board of CMEM can remove it from the register. In this manner, through “soft” regulation, journalists and media workers are under subtle pressure to respect minimum standards when working in online media, which is the least legally regulated segment of the media sphere. The register also promotes transparency in media funding.

**The purpose of the Register is to inform the public, as well as other relevant stakeholders, about internet portals that are guided by ethical and professional standards in journalism.**

In order to support the professionalisation of the media’s work, the adoption of the Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online media, which represent an addition to the Code of Ethics of Journalists, was also crucial. In the last few years, CMEM has also undertaken several other initiatives to support professional reporting by media, such as the Guidelines for Prevention of Corruption and Promotion of Ethics in Media,<sup>63</sup> Guidelines on Reporting from Armed Conflict/War Zones,<sup>64</sup> and Guidelines for Inclusive Media Reporting on COVID-19.<sup>65</sup>

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62 Promedia. *Profesionalni onlajn medijumi*. <https://promedia.mk/>

63 CMEM. (2022). *Nasoki za prevencija od korupcija i promoviranje na etikata vo medijumite*. <https://www.semm.mk/dokumenti/publikacii/1022-nasoki-za-prevencija-od-korupcija-i-promoviranje-na-etikata-vo-medijumite>

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65 CMEM. (2020). *Guidelines for inclusive media reporting on COVID-19*. <https://www.presscouncils.eu/Guidelines-for-Inclusive-Media-reporting-on-Covid-19/>

## VIII.

# CONCLUSIONS

North Macedonia has an established, functional self-regulatory system, which in some areas has some limitations in practice, especially in light of the challenges posed by the digital environment. By the end of 2023, the domestic media legislation should be harmonised with EU regulation on media and digital services, which will also create opportunities for co-regulation between self-regulatory and regulatory mechanisms. This entails that the capacities of self-regulatory mechanisms, both at the level of the profession as a whole and at the level of individual media, should be continuously strengthened.

The Council of Media Ethics in Macedonia (CMEM) plays an essential role in promoting ethical and professional standards in media reporting. Initiatives such as the adoption of Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media, the establishment of a Register of Professional Online Media and the establishment of a Network Against Hate Speech underline the proactive approach of this organisation in improving professionalism in the media landscape.

However, the existing mechanisms for the financial self-sustainability of the most active self-regulatory body, the CMEM, are insufficiently effective, and the financing mainly depends on donor assistance. For now, members do not pay membership fees, although this is one of the possibilities that experts have identified. Its financial situation also affects the human resources, operations, and activities of CMEM.

The role especially of some of the self-regulatory bodies is insufficiently recognised in the public, but also in the media community itself. Although the self-regulatory bodies organise and participate in activities related to the promotion of ethical and professional principles, among other things, they are not sufficiently used as a corrective mechanism in the work of media and journalists. This especially applies to the MRT Ethics Commission, which, despite the promotional information that is occasionally published on the Public Broadcasting Service, received a small number of complaints from members of the public and employees.

The representatives of the self-regulatory bodies also identified a lack of training and of sharing of experiences from other countries, which is essential for effectively tackling professional challenges, especially online.

In North Macedonia, individual media organisations lack internal self-regulation mechanisms such as a media ombudspersons or internal codes of ethical conduct.

The Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media drafted in 2021 represent a significant step in fostering professional standards online. However, there are challenges regarding the successful application of this document, primarily due to insufficiently precise provisions related to users' comments as well as social networks. There are a number of online media that are not part of the Register or do not adhere to the Guidelines.

Digital trends and the changing communication and information environment pose challenges for the Code of Ethics of Journalists, which was adopted in 2001 and cannot respond to the current needs and problems faced by self-regulatory bodies and the media. Nor does the MRT Code of Ethics contain guidelines that are applicable in the internet space and that will enable interaction with the audience. In addition, the document is too sweeping and includes provisions related to both journalistic ethics and work discipline, which interviewees pointed out as a problem in terms of its applicability and functionality.

Media self-regulation is insufficiently promoted among citizens and the younger population as a mechanism. Therefore, additional efforts are needed from the media community and self-regulatory bodies to raise awareness among citizens about what professional media content is. This is one way to encourage critical thinking and increase resistance to misinformation and manipulation.<sup>66</sup>

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66 Interview with Dragan Sekulovski.

## IX.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Professional media organisations, media, civil society and the expert public should initiate an update of the ethics framework (the Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media) to adapt it to the challenges of the new digital environment.
2. Media and professional media organisations should support the process of establishing mechanisms that will enable the financial self-sustainability of the self-regulatory bodies - CMEM and the Council of Honour at AJM. The possibility of state financial support should also be considered, through funding by the Parliament or funding by allocating a small percentage of the budget from other agencies, according to the experiences of other self-regulatory bodies in Europe.
3. Self-regulatory bodies, in cooperation with the civil society, the expert public and professional media organisations should strengthen their human resources and professional capacities through training and exchange of experiences, but also through developing contemporary digital and technological tools that will facilitate their work.
4. The Public Broadcasting Service MRT in cooperation with professional media organisations and the expert public should initiate amendments and additions to the Ethical Code for journalists, creative staff and all MRT employees with the aim to specify and update the content, to adapt it to the online environment and to strengthen the internal system of self-regulation.
5. The Public Broadcasting Service MRT in cooperation with professional media organisations, civil society and the expert public, should encourage the work of the MRT Ethics Commission through regular application of ethics documents, training and sharing of good practices with self-regulatory bodies from other countries. The Commission should actively promote the grievance mechanism among the members of the public to increase awareness and encourage feedback.
6. Professional media organisations and the media should encourage online media to join the Register of Professional Online Media in order to improve the observance of professional and ethical standards online, and to enable the members of the public to recognise professional media.

7. The Register of professional online media should be constantly updated, and appropriate measures should be taken when some members frequently violate the ethical and professional standards in reporting.

8. Self-regulatory bodies in cooperation with the media and civil society organisations should promote the role of self-regulation and the existence of self-regulatory mechanisms, through information campaigns, trainings, education and other events and activities to raise public awareness among different segments of the public.

9. The media community should continue to encourage professional reporting by developing additional guidelines and upgrading the ethical framework on various relevant issues in order to increase trust and encourage public participation.

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## **LIST OF INTERVIEWS**

The interviews for this research were conducted in Skopje in person or online, between 10 and 23 May 2023. We interviewed:

Mirche Adamchevski (President of the Complaints Commission at CMEM);

Teofil Blazhevski (member of the Complaints Commission at CMEM);

Dimitar Micev (representative from media outlet);

Emilia Petreska-Kamenjarova (Assistant Head of department at AAAVMS);

Dragan Sekulovski (media expert, Executive Director of AJM);

Sefer Tahiri (media expert);

Snezhana Trpevska (media expert and member of the Complaints Commission at CMEM);

Two representatives of the MRT Ethics Commission.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## IMPERATIVE OF BOOSTING CAPACITIES AND REINFORCING EFFECTIVENESS

### Media self-regulation in North Macedonia

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