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Ongoing media manipulation in Croatia – the case of Karolina Vidović-Krišto

In 1823, Thomas Jefferson wrote to Marquis de Lafayette;

"The only security of all is in a free press. The force of public opinion cannot be resisted when permitted freely to be expressed. The agitation it produces must be submitted to. It is necessary, to keep the waters pure."

Today, in 2013, the freedom of the press is still under attack in Croatia. Over the last week, a Croatian reporter has been publicly sanctioned and suspended, while her program has been taken off the air. We, Croatians in Croatia and around the world, now wait while the government and HRT (Hrvatska Radio Televizija – Croatian Radio Television) officials decide how the journalist will be further punished for investigative journalism that was critical of government policy.

Our goal is to inform RSF of the lack of progress in the development of media freedom in Croatia, the obstacles that are being encountered and to ask for your help in finding solutions to the problems that need to be solved in order to develop a credible media.

Background to present situation

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Croatia has experienced a long line of manipulation and corruption of media integrity. In 2000 some 50 journalists and editors were fired from HTV when Ivica Račan came to power. In 2012, in preparation for Goran Radman's return to HTV as Director, about 40 editors and journalists were demoted. Late last year Tihomir Dujmović, one of the top journalists, was fired from the national newspaper Večernji List for an embarrassing exposé of President Ivo Josipović pertaining to the ICTY rulings against generals Gotovina and Markač.

Both UNHCR and Freedom House have found that the media is only partly free in Croatia. In 2012, Freedom House ranked Croatia in 83rd place out of 197 countries. In 2011, Croatia ranked 83rd and in 2010 ranked 85th, with the status of a country with partly free media. Freedom of the media is not improving.

The present situation

The most recent manipulation and corruption of media independence and integrity, which has sparked outrage in the public, deals with Ms Karolina Vidović-Krišto, a well respected journalist with HRT/HTV. Ms Vidović-Krišto was the editor and host of a program, produced specifically for the Croatian Diaspora, called “Slika Hrvatske” (Picture of Croatia). The program is quite popular and has received wide acclaim for the topics presented and quality of production.

On December 29, 2012 Ms Vidović-Krišto hosted an episode that investigated the government’s new policies and strategies on sex education. The sex education issue has been a topic of widespread debate in Croatia, in the media and by the people, online in various forums. The program was well researched, professionally produced and of significant interest to the citizens of Croatia. The program, as are most Croatians, was critical of the government policy and the foundations on which the program is based.

On December 30, 2012 the HRT/HTV publically sanctioned Ms Vidović-Krišto, suspended her from her duties and took the show Picture of Croatia off the air. HRT/HTV made the following statement:

*“HRT se ispričava gledateljima emisije Slika Hrvatske (koja se emitira za iseljenike) na jučerašnjoj emisiji urednice i voditeljice Karoline Vidović Krišto. Ističemo kako stavovi izneseni u emisiji nisu stavovi HRT-a. Zbog ozbiljnog narušavanja pravila struke te zloupotrebe položaja, **HRT će poduzeti oštre mjere**” - navedeno je u priopćenju HRT-a.*

*“HRT apologizes to viewers of the program Picture of Croatia (which is broadcast for expatriates) for yesterday's broadcast by editor and host Karolina Vidović-Krišto. We point out that the opinions expressed in the show are not the opinions of HRT. Due to serious breaches of professional rules and abuse of position, **HRT will take strong measures**” - HRT said in a statement.*

Ms Vidović-Krišto is receiving support from large segments of the population but the government is ignoring the people. The Croatian Diaspora, which is accustomed to a media system outside of government control, is particularly outraged. I, along with colleagues, wrote letters of support for Ms Vidović-Krišto and sent them to the HRT main office, but we never received a response.

A Facebook support page for Ms Vidović-Krišto has accumulated more than 25,000 supporters in less than a week – a huge accomplishment in Croatian social media. A survey in the largest Croatian newspaper, Vecernji List, shows the high level of support for the program. The survey question was:

“Were you shocked by the way the show ‘Picture of Croatia’ dealt with the subject of introducing sex education in Croatian schools?”

- *84% of online respondents said “Finally, they said what is true.”*
- *Only 12% said that the program went too far.*



Survey Source:

HRT has apologized for the episode concerning sex education and blames the host
HRT se ispričao zbog emisije o spolnom odgoju i okrivio urednicu
<http://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/hrt-se-ispricao-zbog-emisije-spolnom-odgoju-okrivio-urednicu-clanak-492189>

The importance of a free and independent media

With important local elections and a presidential election happening later this year, debate about government policy must be promoted. Manipulation and corruption of Croatian media independence and integrity, at the only public media entity in the country, destroys the fundamental rights of Croatian citizens to information and subsequently making informed decisions in civic life and elections.

In a democracy, the media must be free to investigate, comment and criticize the government, if need be. This incident sets an extremely bad precedent because journalists across Croatia are now, more than ever, afraid of speaking against the government. There are numerous journalists, especially in the younger generation, that want to speak out against government policies they do not agree with – but are afraid of voicing their concerns. In a country with unemployment at about 20% and near 40% for those under 25, keeping your job is a powerful motivator to “toe the party line”.

HRT, and the TV arm HTV, is the main media entity in Croatia. You should be aware that HRT/HTV is a public and not private media organization. The funding for HTV programming comes directly from the people, who are mandated by law to pay a monthly fee for the operation of HTV. The people are forced to pay for media services but have no say in the nature and editorial content of the programming!

Croatian media and specifically the HRT require reform. We propose the following actions to be taken immediately;

- Dr. Viktor Gotovac, Chairman of the HRT Supervisory Board and former professor in the Faculty of Law at the University of Zagreb, should resign.
- Ms Karolina Vidović-Krišto and the program Slika Hrvatske be reinstated, with no negative consequences to Ms Vidović-Krišto's career.
- The government and HRT provide a public apology to Ms Vidović-Krišto and all other journalists who are now afraid to do their jobs as journalists.
- The HRT should be separated from all political influence and established as a neutral public entity serving the needs of the people.
- Director (ravnatelj) of HTV should not be a political appointment.
- A citizen oversight committee must be created to handle future issues concerning editorial integrity and transparency.


I hope that RSF can investigate this issue and make some recommendations on how to best resolve this situation and further protect journalistic freedom and integrity. It is quite disturbing to see a developed nation, which is ready to enter the EU, still behaving in such an autocratic anti-democratic manner and not making any progress on improving the dismal situation with media freedom.

When journalists are afraid of the government, so too are the citizens. If democratic institutions in Croatia are to mature, and people feel empowered to be civically active and to fulfill their civic duties, the freedom and integrity of the media must be protected!

Arthur Sulzberger, chairman of the board of The New York Times Company, said;

*"Freedom of the press, or, to be more precise, the benefit of freedom of the press, belongs to everyone - to the citizen as well as the publisher... The crux is not the publisher's 'freedom to print'; **it is, rather, the citizen's 'right to know.'**"*

Sincerely,



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References

Youtube video of last episode of 'Slika Hrvatske'

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TlaCwh2Xtc0>

Facebook group with 25,000 supporters

<http://www.facebook.com/groups/401815653238143/>

"Picture of Croatia" program abruptly taken off HRT's programming

Emisija 'Slika Hrvatske' naglo skinuta s programa HRT-a

<http://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/emisija-slika-hrvatske-naglo-skinuta-programa-hrt-a-clanak-493701>

HRT's leadership again on ideological and political wanderings

HRT-ovo vodstvo opet na ideološkim i političkim stranputicama

<http://www.hkv.hr/vijesti/mediji/13815>

Support for Ms Vidovic Kristo from family oriented association

<http://www.h-rast.hr/Aktualno/HRAST-Podrska-novinarki-Karolini-Vidovic-Kristo.html>

Sanctions because of an embarrassing broadcast, HTV cancels "Picture of Croatia"

Sankcije zbog stramotne emisije, HTV ukinuo 'Sliku Hrvatske'!

<http://www.jutarnji.hr/htv-ukinuo-emisiju--slika-hrvatske-/1076182/>

Bozanic: Cancellation of "Picture of Croatia" is a hit to freedom of speech

Bozanić: Ukidanje 'Slike Hrvatske' udar je na slobodu govora

<http://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/bozanic-ukidanje-slike-hrvatske-udar-je-slobodu-govora-clanak-494733>

Dujmović o Josipoviću ili kako ostati bez posla

<http://www.hkv.hr/izdvojeno/vai-prilozi/p-r/peari-josip/13583>

Background on Media Freedom in Croatia

OSCE Warns Croatia Broadcaster on Media Freedom

<http://www.osce.org/fom/90347>

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/osce-warns-croatia-broadcaster-on-media-freedom>

Freedom of the Press 2011 – Croatia

<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,FREEHOU,,HRV,,4e5f71af2,0.html>

Freedom of the Press 2012 - Croatia

<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,,HRV,,507bcae428,0.html>

Freedom House: Croatia's media freedom has improved

<http://daily.tportal.hr/191211/Freedom-House-Croatia-s-media-freedom-has-improved.html>

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Global%20and%20Regional%20Press%20Freedom%20Rankings.pdf>