Main findings in TV stations monitoring during the election campaign. Period: February 26th – March 11th 2014

**CAMERAS CONTROLLED BY POLITICAL PARTIES RENDERED THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN MEANINGLESS – ANOTHER ELECTION CAMPAIGN WASTED**

**Belgrade, March 13th 2014** – Bureau for social research (BIRODI) with support from Slovak organization MEMO 98, **in the period between February 26 and March 11 2014, carried out a media monitoring – TV stations’ main news programs and selected talk-shows pertaining to the elections**. The goal of the monitoring was to inform the public on the behavior of TV stations during the last two weeks of the campaign, as well as to point out cases of deviation from standards of professional reporting/work.

*Thanks to the support of our Slovak partner organization MEMO 98 which enabled the monitoring, BIRODI shall realize a part of the planned activities that were seriously jeopardized by a complete lack of international organizations’ interest in the issue of media work in Serbia. The TV stations encompassed by our monitoring included: RTS1, TV Pink, TV B92, TV Prva, TV Vojvodina (main news programs); as well as the following talk shows: RTS1 – “Upitnik“ (“Questionnaire”), “Da možda ne“ (Yes Maybe No”), TV Pink – “Teška reč“ (“Hard Word”), TV B92 – “Utisak nedelje“ (“Impression of the Week”), TV Prva – “Stav Srbije“ (“Serbia’s Standpoint”), TV Vojvodina – “Sučeljavanje“ (“Head-to-Head”),* Bureau for social research (BIRODI) Executive Director Pavle Dimitrijević stated.

BIRODI Chief Analyst Zoran Gavrilović stated: *The campaign was dominated by personal promotion, more so than the one prior to the 2012 parliamentary elections, which was influenced by the phenomenon of ‘partisan’ cameras. It was thematically shallow – reduced to economic issues. This election cycle, too, saw a campaign relying on government officials, dominated by Ivica Dačić as Prime Minister and Aleksandar Vučić as First Deputy Prime Minister. The parties were unevenly represented, i.e. we had elections on ‘two levels’: the electoral list gathered around SNS, aiming to win the majority, and the other electoral lists struggling to reach the threshold.*

*The voters had a wide scope of information about the participants in the election at their disposal. However, there is a general trend of a lack of analytical reporting in the election campaign, particularly concerning the behavior of government officials. Television stations have often blurred the line between public officials’ activities and their election campaign activities that indirectly helped the parties they represent. The general trend of positive reporting about political actors points out the fact that the media in Serbia are still under strong influence by political parties and the government. In order to provide complete information to the voters so that they can make a decision, the media in Serbia should be a forum for exchange of thought, public debate, investigative journalism and comments which will offer to the public an informative, analytical and estimative view on individuals and groups running for office,* MEMO 98 Media Analyst Rastislav Kuzel concluded.

*Reporting on pre-election activities is featured by a separate and clearly marked election segment on all the monitored television stations. An analysis of the reporting within the election segment indicates that the activities by electoral lists’ representatives running in the forthcoming elections were subject of intensive coverage and that the distribution of the coverage of election participants and their positioning within the segment is more balanced on public broadcasters (RTS1 and RTV) when it comes to reporting on the activities of the coalitions around the ruling SNS and SPS, whereas the other television stations almost uniformly positioned those two parties at No. 1 and No. 2, respectively,* BIRODI Monitoring Team Coordinator Snežana Đapić stated.

The Bureau for social research (BIRODI) team uses a quantitative and qualitative methodology in accordance with international media monitoring standards. BIRODI uses the methodology developed by MEMO 98, an organization from Slovakia which has realized similar projects in 47 countries. The project uses a complex approach which relates to contents and context of the text, designed with the intent to ensure a feedback to the media on pluralism and diversity of media reporting, including the equipment which supplements the presented subject/topic.

**MAIN FINDINGS**

 In general, TV stations are covering the elections as an important event and provide information on the political actors and their respective programs. However, the main news programs offer a predominantly positive coverage of political actors. The media only convey information, so there is a lack of critical and analytical coverage of political actors who participate in the elections (there is no analysis of the proposed political programs).

 While reporting on activities by public officials who are, at the same time, running in the elections, the media are facing the difficulty of differentiating between the coverage of their work as officials and their activities in the campaign. In addition to this, the roles of public officials in the election campaign are not adequately stipulated by the existing provisions in the Republic of Serbia.

 Observing the scope of the coverage and tone of the monitored TV stations, there is a following division: the more equal (Serbian Progressive Party), the equal (electoral list of the coalition gathered around the Serbian Socialist Party, United Regions of Serbia, the electoral list of the coalition gathered around the Liberal Democratic Party, Democratic Party’s list, Serbian Democratic Party’s list and the electoral list of the coalition led by the New Democratic Party – Green) and the less equal (other parties). This division goes along the line of government and opposition but also reflects the parties’ current status in the public opinion. An exception to this rule is represented by the New Democratic Party – Green with its coalition.

 Due to the phenomenon of ‘partisan cameras‘, parties are presented in an extremely positive light in the news programs, thus rendering the election campaign meaningless.

 The thematic framework of the campaign has proven to be somewhat shallow, since the main topic of all monitored TV stations was the economy (employment and investments), whereas other topics, especially those of importance for the institutional and normative system of Serbia, including the issue of constitutional reconstruction, were sidelined or not mentioned at all. It is this particular finding that could prove to be problematic for the future government due to the fact that the submitted promises were reduced to economic issues, while other priorities in the campaign were presented in a superficial and general manner. This relates primarily to changes in the public sector, support for entrepreneurship and reforms of the pension and healthcare system, respectively.

 A campaign dominated by personalities as a phenomenon characterized by above-average positive media coverage of public officials during the election campaign remained in this campaign on the level of the one which took place before the parliamentary elections in 2012. The main actor is First Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić and the topics/events are the “City on Water“ project, the loan from the United Arab Emirates, cooperation between the IKARBUS and “Mercedes” companies, visits to the “Simpo” and “Jumko Vranje” companies and opening of the “Swarovski” factory in Subotica.

 Coverage of the election campaign was clearly marked and highlighted in the news program. By monitoring the program dedicated to the election campaign, we have determined that the coverage deviated from the standards usually practiced by television stations regarding the crediting of journalists/authors, i.e. camera crew. This opens up the question whether TV stations created their own coverage or simply broadcast contents received from participants in the election process. Such thesis can be further illustrated by the debate led on social networks between journalists and participants in the campaign. (There are statements on Twitter)

 Control and state organs in charge of supervision of the election process in the media have been marginalized when it comes to informing the public about their statements.

 The practice of media cooperation with polling agencies established by TV Prva during the previous elections was adopted by TV B92 by regularly conveying the latest information on projected voter turnout and parties’ ratings.

 One can commend the Republic Broadcasting Agency’s efforts to publish its reports during the election period; however, when it comes to the integrity of media reports during the election process, a proactive approach by this agency would be of significance, one which would consist of self-initiatively issuing warnings to the media. In addition to this, during the presentation of results it is of the utmost importance to show in a detailed manner the methodology of measuring and monitoring results for all the media or to publically demonstrate the criteria of selecting TV stations whose program is subject to analysis and presented in reports.

In no way did the monitored news programs and special broadcasts deal with topics/cases of misuse in the campaign and violations of law by participants in the elections, nor with the “registering” of the New Democratic Party via the “Green” party, despite the fact that civic activists and citizens‘ associations regularly pointed out those occurrences.

**KEY PRELIMINARY FINDINGS ON TV STATIONS’ REPORTING**

**(POLITICAL TALK-SHOWS)**

**COMPOSITION OF PARTICIPANTS**

SNS and SPS, i.e. the coalitions led by them, had the most appearances in political talk-shows, while the coalition gathered around DS came in a close second. This list also includes the representatives of: NDS, LDP, DSS, URS, Dveri Movement, Third Serbia, Citizens’ Group “It is Enough“ (listed here by number of appearances, from larger to smaller). It is worth noting that the President of Serbia also took part in one of the talk-shows. Besides political actors, talk-shows were visited by media professionals and civil society representatives.

Representatives of SNS and SPS, respectively, besides the President of Serbia, were the only ones who had the opportunity to be the lone guest in one of the talk-shows.

Some of the party officials appeared in several different talk-shows, which is indicative of personnel capacities and the inter-party level of democracy.

In one edition of the “Sučeljavanje“ talk-show (RTV 1) new and less known parties were given the opportunity to present themselves to the viewers.

**STRUCTURE OF TOPICS**

In the majority of talk-shows, the conversation had no strict thematic framework. Namely, most of the talk-shows had a concept which consisted of dissecting personal equations or banal and non-consequential conflicts only pertaining to daily politics. Such programs do not leave enough time for reasoned demonstration of a value system framework. On the other hand, no concrete solutions were offered when it comes to the key problems of our society. Bearing in mind the stated conclusions, one can raise the question of media-related, as well as a wider societal appropriateness of political talk-shows conceived in such a way.

Programs such as “Odluka“ (“Decision“, TV B92) and “Izbori na Blic“ (“Flash Elections“, TV Prva) indicate that a thematic focus is possible/desirable, especially in the pre-election period. This is primarily the case with “Odluka“ whose given thematic field informed the choice of adequate guests and an enviable analytical level.

With everything considered, based on the monitored talk-shows, we have not obtained a comprehensive, deep, nuanced and differentiated representation of the state and perspectives of our economy and society.

**LOGIC OF MEDIA PRESENTATION**

The monitored television programs reflect in various ways all the features of the current relation between the media and government/economic power. Some anchors tend to assume an independent and active approach towards their guests. In doing so, they opened up a space for critical assessment, analytical depth and journalistic imagination. Even the extremely benevolent observers cannot deny the fact that most of the TV programs were done routinely, with no ability by the anchors to incite reasoned and creative debate.

On the other hand, certain anchors can be recognized as “support” for certain partisan, narrow group and/or individuals‘ interests. Because of that, inter alia, such anchors resemble transparent factors who merely redirect the conversation towards an inexpedient direction, in terms of both media and the general public.

There is also a lack of the anchors‘ dramaturgical skills, since the course and contents of the conversations are often scattered. Only on rare occasions can one notice a media-functional combination of a pre-prepared talk-show draft and an unpredictable – and so precious – spontaneity of debate.

Generally speaking, TV anchors – with certain exceptions – treated all guests equally, so that everyone was able to lay out his/her standpoints. At the same time, the participants were allowed to excessively use petty-political and self-serving rhetoric.

Deconstruction of politicians‘ well-established rhetoric patterns, as an effective media mechanism, has not been implemented in the necessary amount.

BIRODI and MEMO 98 will present the entire material and final report with recommendations for the advancement of media reporting in the period after the elections. The complete material will be available at: www.birodi.rs and www.mediamonitor.rs

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