

## Report on the work of the Press Complaints Commission for 2016

The Press Complaints Commission at the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia has worked under conditions dictated by the situation with the media sphere in Macedonia.

The Commission has been convening more than once a month, beside the provision in its Rules of operation to meet once a month. Everything depended on the volume of complaints received and the time in which they came. Commission's decisions were usually made by consensus. In cases of conflict of interests, certain members of the Press Complaints Commission were excluded from its work. The Commission always tried to work in a full composition, and Skype communication was frequently used.

The number of press complaints has been increasing in the last period. This is certainly not a measure of the Council of Ethics' work. Press councils can get thousands of complaints. This figure speaks that the Council is visible, but also that professionalism and ethics is inversely proportional to the number of complaints. A general conclusion of the Commission is that the state of media ethics in our country worsens.

Let us make a little reflection on the past work. First, it seems that journalists have forgotten what they learned in the first days of their studies in journalism and that information should be accurate and reliable. In a more than 80 percents of all press complaints it can be easily identified that this is a forgotten lecture from the university or from the newsroom. Second, private interest is affected and journalists are not even afraid of the implications. The fact that hate speech is a crime is also forgotten, similarly as it is a case with discrimination on different grounds. Journalists also prefer to comment rather than inform and work with facts. Facts are often a forgotten category. Culture of speech is not cultivated and there is an absence of decent communication with the public.

Journalists also forget that election reporting should be balanced and impartial. Let us recall that the Council of Media Ethics has developed a Charter on Ethical Reporting during Elections, which was signed by about 90 media, but they have forgotten this fact. Let's use some statistics now, i.e bring up some numbers about the period since the establishment of the Press Complaints Commission, or the beginning of its practical work. Since 2015, a total of 179 press complaints were filed to the CMEM. The Commission made 149 adjudications which identify breaches of the Code of Journalists of Macedonia. Six cases were resolved with mediation, while 13 were not upheld as they were overdue or not under the jurisdiction of the Press



Complaints Commission. One press complaint was withdrawn, while two were closed because procedural deadlines have passed or there was no response by the complainant.

In order to facilitate access to the adjudications by the Press Complaints Commission and increase visibility, the Executive Office organized a database of all decisions which are gathered at one place and there is a clear overview of the specific breaches of the standards, names of the complainants, media, etc. This overview is available at the web page of the CMEM, at the following link <http://www.semm.mk/attachments/pregled-na-odluki-2016.pdf>. This overview clearly presents that 76 adjudications were made last year, indicating breaches of the professional and ethical standards. More specifically, the Press Complaints Commission made 85 adjudications on the basis of the press complaints received, out of which 9 were not upheld, while the others identify breaches of certain standards in the Code of Journalists. Beside the previously mentioned, we would like to emphasize that two press complaints were resolved with a process of mediation, while 10 were not upheld due to their late submission or due to the fact that they were not under the jurisdiction of the Council. One case was closed because the procedural deadline has passed.

Out of the 76 adjudications made, the most frequently breached standard is article 1 of the Code of Journalists, which refers to the publishing of accurate and reliable information... providing of a “second source” of information or at least two non-related sources. This provision has been breached 66 times or in 86,8% of the press complaints. Article 13 – journalists should make a difference between facts and opinions, between news and comments – was breached in 54 cases or in 71,1% of the press complaints. Article 14, according to which media coverage of political processes, particularly during elections should be impartial and balanced and with a distance from the political figures, was breached 26 times, or in 34,2% of the cases. Article 4 – journalists should identify the source of information and if the source requires anonymity journalists should protect him – was breached 23 times. Article 10, according to which journalists should not produce information that endanger human rights and freedoms, speak with the language of hatred and incite violence or discrimination on whatever grounds, was breached 17 times, or in 22,4% of the press complaints. Article 16, which provides that the journalist shall protect dignity and reputation of his profession, urge mutual solidarity and do not use media to deal with certain people, including his colleagues, was breached 14 times. Article 7, which refers to the respect of privacy, except when it is opposite to the public interest and which states that the journalist is responsible to respect personal pain and grief is breached 15 times. Below 10 breaches refer to the article 11 – journalist will adhere to the generally accepted social standards of decency and observance of ethnical, cultural and religious diversity in Macedonia, article 15, which refers to



ethics in speech, then article 3 which provides that the journalist shall strive to provide publication of correction, denial or reply in case when there is inaccuracy of the information provided, article 8 which refers to sensationalism and article 9 which refers to violation of children's rights.

Portals are the type of media for which press complaints were most often filed about. They are followed by national TV stations and newspapers. This is quite expected because Internet portals are mostly represented type of media. We are all clear what happens in the online sphere, faked news, events, collective publishing of the same text, without even changing punctuation. There are articles containing very obvious lies, which are supported by any fact, texts which state "we have found out" without possessing any "known fact". Journalists shall search for facts, but not only from one source of information or by some center for public relations. We have press complaints filed against media which do not even have an address for communication, neither an editorial team.

What are the reactions by the media on the adjudications made by the Press Complaints Commission? We are happy that there are cases when mainstream media published our adjudications, even though they are not among our founders and when these cases indicate breaches of standards made by them. They include the weekly Fokus, TV 24, TV Nova and others. We think that this will serve as an example for other media as well, particularly for the CMEM's founders, who should behave in a similar fashion, as this is the essence of the Council of Media Ethics' existence. If they already committed themselves to belong to a self-regulation body like this one, they should also respect its decisions. On the other hand, we are not happy when editors in chief reply back to the press complaints by saying that we are so-called "Sorosoids" or when they use rude words against us or even threaten.

In the last period, the Press Complaints Commission did not receive any press complaint which refers to copied texts, videos or photographs, even though our colleagues often complain about this issue. Code of Journalists contains articles which protect copyright, as one of the issues that needs to be addressed professionally.

Before closing, I would add that if in the past we talked about increasing the visibility of the Commission and the Council among the population, civil society, students and colleagues, this is now a regular practice. Last year, members of the Commission and the Board repeatedly visited higher education institutions and representatives of civil society organizations. The Council and the work of the Press Complaints Commission were promoted at those meetings and the impression is that these meetings should continue, because young people are very interested in what we are doing, and they know what to ask. It would be a



good solution to establish a practice of convening sessions of the Press Complaints Commission outside of Skopje, by certainly taking into account the financial possibilities for this purpose. The sessions of the Commission are now open, and such would be those outside Skopje which can be attended by citizens, civil society representatives and others. In this way, the Commission and the Council would be increasingly approaching the public. And we think that this is one of the goals of the CMEM.

At the end, there is global campaign in the world about some kind of regulation or a higher supervision of the online media. This would be a challenge for the self-regulatory body, which needs to adapt to the new trends. The least it can do is to adjust the existing Code of Journalists to the new times and the new requirements.

