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**When the huge illegal wiretapping scandal broke out in 2015, it was something unprecedented for the public in North Macedonia. The sheer scope of the wiretapping, carried out by the secret police and leaked to the opposition party at the time, which revealed it to the public, was mind-boggling. When you look back at it now, what are your thoughts about what happened?**

I was a young reporter then. And even before the big revelation about the mass wiretapping, I remember there was a running joke in journalistic circles that whenever your [mobile] phone heats up, someone is listening, you'd better change your phone.

But it turns out that it was not so funny. Little did we know how proficiently and professionally it was being done. Done on an industrial scale, so to speak, with thousands of phones being wiretapped. So it was not an operation that was being carried out by just anyone. It was the state apparatus in conjunction with the telecommunications providers that did the listening and then the processing of the data, so the realisation of how massive it was and that anyone could be monitored just like that came as a shock.

It was an uneasy feeling but then again, back then we were so focused on the revelations from the published wiretaps, on the scandals involving big names, major politicians and businessmen, and on trying to get on top of it all, to report properly about it, that we did not have time to take a breath and think much about the big picture. And then the political crisis happened, the big anti-government and pro-government protests that lasted for two more years until the regime was ousted in 2017. We were caught in the turbulence of all these events that were so overwhelming.

Now, from this perspective, we can think about what happened much more soberly and be much more cynical about the outcome. For example, there were

always doubts whether the telephone conversations that were published by the opposition should have been published in that way - at press conferences, in the media. Whether it actually helped in awakening society or it just created an appetite for someone else's affairs, turned us all into listeners, voyeurs, and normalised on a societal level the practice of wiretapping as something we all got used to.

**You mentioned cynicism. What's the reason behind this cynicism? In other words, did the reforms of the security system after the change in government instil a sense of security that something like this, the large-scale wiretapping of thousands of people, could not happen again?**

Formally, yes. The Social Democrats, who now lead the government and who were the ones who broke the wiretapping [scandal], made some changes. They disbanded the former secret police. There are some mechanisms in place that should assure us that if it's not completely impossible, because nothing is 100 per cent sure, then at least it would be much harder to pull off a similar operation today in which the state freely eavesdropped upon thousands of individuals and that it would go unnoticed for years.

But in reality, we have seen that wiretapped conversations continued to appear in the public domain - new ones which I presume were recorded after the change in government. Both on social networks and in our media outlets, from time to time, there are still wiretapped conversations appearing. And what does that tell us? That someone is still listening, or has the capacity to engage in such activities.

That's why I said that now we have normalised wiretapping. We hear these conversations, often involving politicians, but we do not see any action [taken against this]. The public is not particularly startled by it, and the authorities, I mean the judiciary and the police, it appears, are doing nothing to curb this, to find out who did it and so on.

And now the question is, who is listening? Maybe it's not the Agency for National Security, but obviously there are powerful individuals, business groups linked with politics or vice versa who have the power and the interest in doing it. Maybe to

harm or discredit their opponents, or to promote themselves, for financial reasons.

I say this because journalists are also among the primary, natural targets of these groups. For a society that wants to be democratic, it really does not make a big difference if there is one big political party that listens and eavesdrops on everyone, influencing and capturing every aspect of life in society, or if there are several entities that do the same but on a smaller scale, because they will cause turmoil too, they will influence public opinions, aggravate or antagonise the public, influence journalism and reporting in general and deflect it from the problems that really matter.

On the other hand, we are very late with resolving the wiretapping scandal from a legal point of view, which means finding and punishing the perpetrators. Legally, the court concluded that the wiretapping was done by the former secret police and that its former head, Sašo Mijalkov, along with several accomplices, were responsible for it. But the ruling was overturned at the court of appeals and we are now waiting for a retrial that must end by 2025 with a final verdict. In other words, there is little time left [before the legal deadline] - or otherwise, the perpetrators could walk free even if found guilty again.

And if you ask anyone on the street, most will tell you that they do not believe anymore that there will be a proper legal conclusion and that anyone will genuinely be held responsible. Even there is, we've missed the chance to set an example and send a message that these acts are punishable, because nobody cares anymore. Instead, we have sent, as a society, a message of apathy, of cynicism, of impunity and we should not be surprised that people in general are just not so interested anymore.

**That leads me to my next question. You mentioned the media and journalists still being potential targets. Do you think that the revelations from the wiretapping scandal, which showed how the political elite at the time literally dictated to the mainstream media the topics they should cover and how to cover them, helped in democratising the media space, easing the pressure on journalism in general, or do you think that we have still a long way to go?**

There was hope that this would happen, yes. But let's be honest. Did we not know that our media were clients of whoever was in power or whoever had the money, before the wiretapping scandal broke out? Everyone knew that this was the case, not only with mainstream media, I mean mostly the TV stations as we are still predominantly a society that watches TV, but also with the many local stations and news websites.

And in that regard, nothing much has really changed for the better. Yes, one political regime that dominated the media sphere was dismantled, but the shady ownership structure of the media is the same, the link between politics, business and media remained the same, and the weakest link is the media, or journalists, to be more precise, who remain the subordinates in this relationship.

We as professionals and as a society never managed to build proper journalism that would serve the public interest first and only then the interest of maybe some individuals. What does exist of this kind of journalism resides in some small outlets that still push for investigative or analytical content that will benefit the public, that will notify the public about problems and help them become properly informed. And the main problem is that the wider audience is not even capable of discerning what is what - what is professional reporting that would benefit them and what is mere propaganda or PR that only serves to mislead and confuse them.

So to return to your question - no. I don't think that the wiretaps were the wake-up call for the public or for the media. For that ever to happen, you need media workers who would first of all be financially independent so that they can do their jobs properly, and secondly, a long and hard education in media literacy for the public, so they could recognise and therefore appreciate and stand by those media that do produce important content.

Interview by Sinisa Marusic, 2023

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