

Vasko Popetrevski

Editor-in-chief, 360 Degrees TV show and website

North Macedonia

I am Vasko Popetrevski, editor-in-chief of 360 Degrees, the name under which a television show is broadcast on Alsat television and a news website is published. The show is in its ninth season. That's how long the brand has been around.

I have previously worked for the largest Macedonian television stations, for A1 and for Channel 5. I graduated in journalism in 2000, and before graduating I was involved in journalism non-professionally.

My beginnings are at the local radio station in Strumica. I was there from 1994, still as a high school student at that time. I worked on the youth programme. I was a sports journalist for a while, a correspondent for the sports programme of Radio Skopje - Macedonian Radio, so I already have a fairly long journalistic career.

I also worked a little for the press, interestingly, for the daily newspaper 'Dnevnik' and the weekly 'Gragjanski'.

In 2015, there was a political earthquake. The opposition at that time, the current ruling party, began publishing so-called 'bombshells' - wiretapped conversations - and the public was introduced to things for the first time that it could not have dreamed of until then. However, in the background, a little-known fact remained that before and after those [opposition] press conferences, many journalists including you received big, thick folders from the then opposition containing their conversations that had been wiretapped. How did it feel when you found out and received that folder yourself?

To be honest, there were some signs, even before 2015 - some reactions, comments that came from certain places - that probably there was wiretapping going on in the country.

And I had indications that I was probably being eavesdropped upon. But to be honest, I did not believe that it was on such a scale as we actually became aware of in 2015.

After the establishment of the Special Public Prosecutor's Office [to tackle allegations arising from the mass wiretapping], I checked [the files], I wanted to know how much I was eavesdropped upon, and it turned out that literally day and night for seven-and-a-half years, all my phones were being listened to 24 hours a day.

And the checks showed that, not the day afterwards but the very same day I changed my phone number, it was immediately bugged. So to be honest, I didn't believe it was so wide-ranging.

The folder I received [from the Special Public Prosecutor's Office] was not very thick. It may have been thicker than other people's folders, but it was just a small part of the transcripts from some of the conversations.

Basically, it showed us that the ruling party at that time listened to, monitored and recorded [phone conversations], that it probably did not have the capacity to transcribe all of it, to put it down on paper, but at certain times, when there were, shall we say, some crises, it used part of these conversations.

Probably they even ended up on the desks of the highest [officials] in the government. In the folder I received, it was written that they probably went to the office of the prime minister at that time.

They were short transcripts of phone conversations with the substance of the conversations extracted for the needs of the then ruling elite.

You asked me about what I felt. I'll say I wasn't surprised. If I was surprised, I was surprised by the scale of the operation. Otherwise, as I said, I already had some indications that the calls were being eavesdropped upon.

As for the scope of the operation, it was later determined in court that at least 4,200 phone numbers were tapped. The then head of the secret police was given a 12-year prison sentence, but a bitter feeling remained. And we also had a reform that envisaged the separation of agencies [splitting the secret police

into two separate parts]. One part was in charge of the technical part of the wiretapping, another with processing [the surveillance material]. From this perspective, do you get any satisfaction or assurance that that whole affair has borne fruit - that today we live in a society where it is difficult or impossible to eavesdrop on people? Or do you still think [the process] remains unfinished?

The reform that was carried out and which caused the dissolution of the infamous UBK, the Security and Counter-Intelligence Agency, resulted in the formation, as you said, of the OTA, the Operational Technical Agency, which now has the use of the eavesdropping equipment, and ANB, that is the National Security Agency, which was left without the equipment but could be the beneficiary of some of the materials that will be produced.

This separation, or above all the formation of the OTA, to an extent, I think now instils hope that the abuse, if it exists, cannot happen to the extent to which it happened before.

To be honest, at this point, I don't think there's any abuse of wiretapping and I don't think there's illegal wiretapping, although there are stories coming from various sides about [illegal surveillance] systems in apartments and so on. But to be honest, I don't think such things exist.

As for the general perception among the public, the distrust has remained. Even though that's how I feel, it doesn't mean that it's the same for the general public. Distrust remains and will probably remain for a long time, because even if some progress was made on that front, in other parts of society, when it comes to the rule of law, the fight against corruption, somehow there has not been much progress. So I think that because they see other systems in the country being abused, people think that this [security] system can also be abused.

We mentioned the societal impact, but what about the freedom of the media? Through those wiretaps that were released, we got an insight into how things were done, how information and instructions flowed from top to bottom to set the media narrative and the news of the day. Do you think it is possible that

such a thing is happening today? Did we experience something cathartic in the sense that it will get us in the media to clean up our own backyard?

I think that if there is an area in which there is progress, compared to the period before 2017, when the then VMRO-DPMNE and DUI government was basically ousted, it is in the media sphere.

The situation is far from ideal. But I think that in terms of freedom, and in conjunction with increased institutional transparency, there has been progress. This is also shown by some of the latest reports on media freedom. We have the latest from Reporters Without Borders, which basically shows a big upward trend, although to be honest, I think there is inertia. I think we should have seen this three or four years ago. Now this upward trend seems kind of late to me, but I don't think it's unreal. In this sphere, I think there is progress.

This does not mean that the ruling parties do not have their own media clusters through which they try to dictate and set the agenda and influence the public. Or that the [VMRO-DPMNE] opposition party, which was in power until 2017, did not also maintain a cluster of its own media outlets through which it does the same thing.

But the majority of media outlets work relatively freely, I think. When I say relatively, I mean that the difficult economic situation remains, the financial vulnerability which is then reflected in the relatively low quality of our journalism.

We have many critical voices in our society, which is good of course in a democracy, but we have relatively low-level journalism in terms of quality.

Vasko, at the moment you are involved in a court case [against former secret police chief Sašo Mijalkov] as one of the injured parties. Will you get any kind of moral satisfaction in terms of receiving compensation for what happened to you personally and as a professional, or do you think that it's all meaningless after so many years?

No, I think that everything should be legally wrapped up. Unfortunately, as we record this interview, the mother of all mass wiretapping cases – ‘Target-Fortress’ – is at the very beginning of a retrial. You mentioned the 12-day sentence for Mijalkov, but it fell at the appeals court, so we're starting from scratch.

And there will be a race against time because if there is no final verdict by 2025, the case may legally end with a verdict, but Mijalkov will not go to prison, if he is found guilty again, because [the statute of limitations] will expire.

In that sense, I think that this case must end with a final judgment if we want to say that we are starting to become a normal society.

I have the status of a witness and injured party in that case, because I am one of several thousand who were eavesdropped upon.

Do I expect any satisfaction from it? I said in the first trial that I would seek some kind of compensation through a civil lawsuit. If you consider that for seven-and-a-half years, day and night, someone was in your bedroom, in the bathroom, everywhere you were, and compare it to any amount that you can expect as compensation, of course there's no comparison.

But more in a symbolic way, I think it's important. And the criminal procedure should end with a final verdict, and then, in civil lawsuits, people should receive some kind of compensation, more symbolic, as a message that this should not and must not happen again.

Finally, you mentioned that as a result of what happened, in some areas, such as in the media, there has been a big, serious step forward. However, the wider public has become a bit numb after the scandal. We can see that in recent years, various wiretapped conversations have still been published sporadically on a much smaller scale. Are you afraid that after this odyssey that we went through, if something similar happened again, the reaction from society would be much milder?

I agree, particularly if it happens to us in the next few years. As we move away from that 2015 [scandal], memories will fade and then if something similar

happens, I expect that the reaction will be more intense. But at this moment I agree with you that unfortunately the general public is numb, and that nothing can irritate it, not even a scandal of similar proportions, which is not good for the mental health of our society.

Interview by Sinisa Marusic, 2023

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