

VI THE PRIVATIZATION PROCESS

Early April was marked by news on the interest-free loan extended by the Government to the state news agency Tanjug. The Government granted the 17.5 million dinar loan to Tanjug for reporting on the election campaign. The same agency received more than 216 million dinars from the budget for the year 2011. NUNS, UNS, ANEM, NDNV and Local Press said that extending interest-free loans from the budget to a state-owned news agency might pave the way for the state to interfere even more in editorial policy. The Media Coalition also said that the move was also in contradiction with the principles of the Media Strategy adopted last year by the Government. “This move has resulted in further systemic muzzling of non-state media, aiming at establishing a monopoly. The Government is drastically breaching its promises given to media associations that it will embark on a genuine reform process in the media sector”, the press release said. The Serbian PM Mirko Cvetkovic responded that all media enjoyed equal treatment, but that the Government had extended the loan to Tanjug because it was a state company and the state should care for state companies. “Tanjug had difficulties repaying several prior loans and the state decided to help with a short-term loan they will repay”, Cvetkovic said, according to the Fonet news agency. In Cvetkovic’s words, Tanjug is not an isolated case – other state-owned companies receive loans when in difficulties, because the state will not let them collapse. Otherwise, the Government’s decision does not mention earlier Tanjug loans at all, but merely that the 17.5 million have been allotted for reporting about the electoral campaign and on Election Day May 6. However, the PM’s words were soon denied by the media. The daily “Blic” reported that the employees in Radio Sombor, also a state-owned company, had received their last minimum wage for January 2011. In 2010, they received only three minimum wages and a mere 5000-dinar advance for the remaining months. Radio Sombor was privatized in 2007, but the privatization contract was terminated in mid 2008 and the station was taken over by the state. In yet another media that is partly in private ownership – Politika – the German media group WAZ offered the state its 50% share for 4.7 million Euros. Although the offer was expected since WAZ is withdrawing from Serbia, it shows that the state is everything but withdrawing from media ownership (as announced in the Media Strategy). In the context of such information, the concern of journalists’ and media associations that the state is establishing a monopoly in the media is completely justified. We remind that the Media Strategy provides for the withdrawal of the state from public media ownership within 24 months from determining the legal grounds. The legal grounds for privatization, except for the Tanjug news agency, already exist.