

**The Big Brother of the Balkans**  
**THIS IS ME: 'TOA SUM JAS - TO SAM JA - TO SEM JAZ'**

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“Former Yugoslavian Republics Together Again”. This news would go well in the headlines of newspapers’ cover pages or prime-time TV newscasts. Rest assured, there’s no room for panic, because this is only a so-called international reality show broadcast by Macedonian television, which can also be followed by viewers in all former YU republics via satellite transmission. The team in the house is also a mixed one: it includes all former ‘nationalities and ethnic groups’. And that would be the entire story, nothing new and nothing unusual. However, when we take a deeper look, the matter proves to be far more serious than it seems.

**How did it begin?**

In early 2004, Macedonian television launched the reality show titled “Toa sum jas” [*in Macedonian language: ‘this is me’*]. This show programme comprised two cycles, and it was designed for viewers in Macedonia. The audience accepted it well; no negative reactions ensued, at least not publicly. The results (primarily those of a financial kind) were undoubtedly good, so the appetites of organisers went higher. They came to the idea to expand the space further, and thus “enable the communication among people from various regions, particularly those from former Yugoslavia”. The objective was successfully achieved. Much to the general content, in late 2004, the show “Toa sum jas, To sam ja, To sem jaz” went on the air (i.e., the title was translated into all three languages of former Yugoslavia).

## **What can be seen?**

In a house, isolated from the outside world, there live a dozen-or-so young people, who are doing their best to fill their day and make themselves likable to the audience, so the audience would vote for them, because the awards are considerable. Even those dropped from the game do not leave with their hands empty. Their comfort-awards include watches, computers, mobile phones, shopping-money, arrangements for tourist travels for each of the participants, while the main reward still remains to be seen.

Every new day brings the scenes of the happenings that are common to our homes - the participants talk on diverse topics, sometimes quarrel, sleep, prepare meals, wash dishes, take shower, do their laundry, read, play various collective games and similar. And all that, surprisingly, draws high interest of viewers – not only those from former Yugoslavia, but also those abroad (Sweden, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Holland), and they can watch it through the Macedonian television satellite - Mktv Sat.

In addition, in evening hours (usually at 23:10), there goes the entertaining contact-programme from the studio, presented by a mixed team of moderators from Macedonia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. They have a 'chat' about goings-on in the house, offering a couple of stories to the viewers: so-called "Feature of the Day" (the selection of the most interesting events in the house during the day), "No Comment" (silent recording of an event), top-list of participants by the number of votes they won, as well as the telephone numbers to submit votes via telephone or SMS. Of course, the viewers are offered the option to call directly into the show, or to send their SMS messages. And they do call, indeed – they literally call from all towns of former Yugoslavia (Skopje, Zagreb, Sarajevo, Ljubljana, Mostar, Jesenice, Trebinje...) even from places abroad, commenting on the events in the house and the behaviour of its residents. They all say that they regularly watch these programmes, that they like them very much, and many are already interested in the details of the next cycle. It will probably be only by the end of the month when they receive their telephone bills - and this especially refers to those abroad – that they will understand how much such an entertainment costs. Those malicious add: through MSM messages and telephone calls, the audience is charged for its own curiosity. The message reads: the more scandalous the offer, the more reactions through mobiles and fixed telephones, and thus stronger effects and higher profits.

And that is not all. In addition to the satellite channel programme, Macedonian television also broadcasts short show programmes (10 to 15 minutes long) in both the First and the Second TV Channels, three times a day, from Monday to Friday, while the studio programme in the Second Channel lasts up to an hour and 20 minutes. This probably targets those viewers, primarily in Macedonia, that have neither cable nor satellite connection. Namely, the First programme of MTV covers over 98% of Macedonian territory, while the Second covers a somewhat smaller area. In addition, there is also the web site at [www.toasumjas.com.mk](http://www.toasumjas.com.mk). Abundant offer, indeed!

### **When did the problems start?**

The episode of early February made feelings run high. Bizarre scenes were presented to viewers (masturbation of one of the participants to the show) in a very explicit form, which displeased the public, especially its professional and scientific part. Newspapers started covering the story, and the Broadcast Council also came forward. As early as 2004, this Council issued warnings to the management of MRTV, requesting the broadcasts to cease, with the explanation that they stood in contravention with the provisions of Law on Broadcast Activities, and European documents relating to public services. The latest one was issued on 10 February. No reply followed. What followed was the refusal of public condemnation by the director of Macedonian television, who denied claims that the show encouraged low passions and breached the criteria of good taste. Explaining the specific case, he said that it was very hard to control the behaviour of all participants, while the incriminated scenes were masked with so-called trick-effects. Furthermore, he laconically added that all other public services in Europe do the same, like BBC or HRT.

Leaving aside the quality of such a type of programmes, what remains the most important is the fact that all this is about a broadcast service, which should be responsible to its viewers, both professionally and ethically. Not only that the blending of news and educational programmes together with very questionable commercial programmes, topples down the basic functions and values of a public service; it also means embarking on a fateful adventure. If that is one of the ways to earn more money and win higher ratings, the MTV seems to have chosen the wrong way. Tomorrow, when commercial media launch attacks against MTV – and they certainly will, at the earliest convenient

opportunity (as they've been doing constantly, due to the damping prices of advertisements), no-one will bother to defend the undefendable.

What the analysts are concerned about is the inertia of the authorities. Is it possible that they are unaware what programmes are aired via satellite, especially in view of the fact that Macedonian Government, i.e. the Ministry of Transport and Communications, is the signatory of the agreement on Mktv Sat satellite broadcasts signed two years ago. Don't the members of the Parliament sometimes watch Macedonian television programmes? Finally, they are its founders. The long-standing crisis into which this national service sinks is becoming increasingly evident, while the authorities have failed to do anything to help the implementation of reforms, except rhetorically. By all means, Macedonia desires the accession into European Union; it recently submitted answers to the far-famed membership questionnaire. Nevertheless, it feels no need for an objective journalism nor a respectable and influential public broadcast service.

### **What can be done?**

Almost nothing instantly and efficiently. The Broadcast Council has its hands practically tied down; it cannot prevent the broadcasts of show programmes. Legally, its role is limited to issuing warnings to MRTV management, and sending requests to the latter to reconsider its decision to broadcast programmes of this type. The next measure is notifying the Assembly, which is the founder of Macedonian television, or ultimately, if the law is breached, taking offence procedures.

There is no dilemma: the show is in contravention with the provisions of the Broadcast Law. The arguments stated by Broadcast Council relate to the character of the programme itself and its contents, language and financial effects achieved (Articles 8, 35, 45, 77 and 80 of the Law). The show has a commercial character, with contents offering the entertainment of a very problematic concept of value system and ethos, deflecting from basic programme characteristics of a public service, which should present the example of a high quality. At the same time, the commercial character of this show enables MTV to obtain additional profits (from viewers' voting), which is in contravention with the financing methods of the house through broadcast taxes (i.e., from citizens) and through marketing, i.e. advertisements. So far as the language is concerned, a public service is duty-bound to

maintain and preserve the official language of literature, while the show exercises both Macedonian and Serb, Croat, Bosnian and Slovenian languages, oftentimes using a mixture of them all, without translation (which is also the obligation of MTV). But, a much worse problem is the use of improper words, allusions to sexual behaviour and curses. Finally, one important purpose of satellite programmes is also nurturing the Macedonian cultural traditions and values among Macedonian citizens living abroad.

### **The last straw**

In the meantime, another 'incident' happened: a quarrel between two participants to the show programme, which provoked one of them to display his sexual organs. Viewers responded with the request to the Council to finally take appropriate action. The Broadcast Council has already prepared documentation for official offence procedures, referring to the Broadcast Law provisions, primarily for the improper contents (Article 35), and the language of the show (Article 45). Certainly, an argument plus is also the Law on Macedonian Language Use (particularly its Article 6, obliging media to use Macedonian language), as well as the European Council's Resolution No 1/1994 for future public broadcasters (related to ethical standards and the standards of quality); European Council Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1641(2004)<sup>1</sup> for public broadcast services (especially for quality standards); Recommendation of Broadcast Council for the protection of minors; and the Recommendation of Broadcast Council concerning the use of special-tariff telephone services in radio and television programmes.

Finally, do we have to remind that no European public service broadcasts such a type of programmes? Probably not even the one called 'sporting house'.

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