

MEDIA PROGRAM

SOUTH EAST EUROPE

DARIJA FABIJANIĆ

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MANUELA ZLATEVA

November 2017

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New approaches needed for media freedom and against disinformation

KEY TOPICS OF THE XI. "SOUTH EAST EUROPE MEDIA FORUM" IN SOFIA WERE NEW STRATEGIES FOR QUALITY JOURNALISM AND MEDIA LITERACY

Press freedom, disinformation, media literacy and the quality of political debates in Europe were the main themes on the 27th and 28th November at the XI. South East Europe Media Forum (SEEMF) in Sofia. Over 200 journalists, publishers, media experts and politicians from all over Europe came to the biggest media conference in the region. The KAS Media Program South East Europe hosts the forum together with the South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO) and the Central European Initiative (CEI).

The event was opened by **Christian Spahr**, Director of the KAS Media Program South East Europe, and **Oliver Vujović**, SEEMO General Secretary. Spahr spoke about the challenges which media in South East Europe are facing, e.g. the influence of media owners on the editorial work, the high concentration of ownership and the weak media markets. According to him it is necessary to encourage solidarity and mutual support among reporters. "Journalists need more support also from the EU and Western partners," said Spahr.

Bulgarian Minister presents the main focuses of the EU Presidency 2018

Co-host CEI was represented by **Nedelcho Mihaylov** from the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry. During the welcome addresses **Dr. Lars Hänsel**, Head of the KAS Team Europe/North America, emphasised that politicians have the power to provide a better framework for media freedom. "The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung supports all

those who strive for quality media," said Hänsel.

The Minister for the Bulgarian EU Presidency, **Lilyana Pavlova**, took part in the official opening. In her speech she presented the priorities of the EU Presidency. One of them would be the EU integration of the Western Balkans. "The Bulgarian EU Presidency will be a Balkan Presidency. The EU project cannot be fulfilled without the Western Balkans," explained the Minister. Pavlova said that integration is the key to stability and prosperity.

A welcome note of the EU Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society, **Mariya Gabriel**, was presented by **Hristo Hristov** of the Representation of the European Commission in Bulgaria. Mariya Gabriel sees fake news as a danger since the media markets are very instable. Thus, there is a necessity to look actively for solutions.

New KAS study on media freedom and political communication in Bulgaria

The Managing Partner of the Bulgarian research institute "Alpha Research", **Boriana Dimitrova**, presented the results of a study commissioned by the KAS Media Program South East Europe. According to the survey, only ten percent of Bulgarians believe in independent media. Dimitrova commented that with decreasing trust in media the trust in democracy also decreases. The political communication of politicians in Bulgaria was also analysed.

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Only eleven percent of Bulgarians feel well informed by politicians. The results of the study are available [here](#).

Weak rule of law is an issue for media in Bulgaria

After the opening speeches, the conference started with a debate about the relationship between media and politics in Bulgaria.

Oliver Vujović moderated the discussion. **Slavka Bozukova**, CEO of the daily "Standart", commented that media need to fulfil their function as intermediaries between citizens and politicians in better ways. **Stoyana Georgieva**, Editor-in-Chief of the online platform "mediapool.bg", identified the interdependence between media and politics as a main challenge in Bulgaria. **Konstantin Kamenarov**, Director General at the Bulgarian National TV (BNT), criticised that citizens are not interested enough in politics and thus insufficiently inform themselves about politics. **Ivo Prokopiev**, Chairman of the Board of Directors of "Economedia", commented on the independence of media – without real rule of law, free media and democracy are not possible. **Venelin Petkov**, Director of News and Current Affairs of bTV, stated that there is media which report professionally and objectively and they should not be lumped together with other media outlets. For **Mariya Stoyanova**, Member of the Council for Electronic Media, the biggest problem is the self-censorship of Bulgarian journalists. In her opinion the media situation is not as bad as often pictured. **Assen Yordanov**, investigative journalist and founder of the website "bivol.bg", talked about the attempts of politicians to censor and influence the media.

Journalists from Moldova and Ukraine receive CEI SEEMO Award

During the conference the "CEI SEEMO Award for Outstanding Merits in Investigative Journalism" was given to **Victor Mosneag**, reporter of the Moldovan daily "Ziarul de Gardă", for investigations about corruption and weak rule of law. **Yevheniia Motorevska** (Ukraine), investigative journalist from the weekly TV

programme "Slidstvo.Info" was awarded in the category "Young Journalist" for reporting about crime and corruption in the public sector of her country.

Active engagement for media freedom

The second day of the conference started with the panel "Securing media freedom – strategies that really help". **Markus Bernath**, South East Europe/Turkey correspondent of the daily "Der Standard", was the moderator of the discussion. The speakers discussed strategies how media freedom in South East and Central Europe can be strengthened permanently. In his keynote **Frane Maroević**, Director of the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media in Vienna, emphasised that the biggest threat are personal attacks against journalists. Impunity regarding attacks against journalist sends a wrong message: It encourages the perpetrators and leaves journalists to live in fear. A broad debate and a coordinated approach beyond national borders are necessary.

Radka Betcheva, Head of the Partnership Programme and Member relations Eastern Europe of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), called for action from all media stakeholders and for the creation of a legal framework at EU level which should protect media freedom in a tightly focussed way. To start this process, a critical mass of supporters is required, underlined Betcheva. **Henrik Kaufholz**, Chairman of the European Center for Press and Media Freedom, commented: "Today, it's all about protecting media freedom from governments that are trying to systematically narrow it down." This works best when journalists and media managers join forces and work together.

Jeta Xharra, Executive Director of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) for Kosovo, stressed that journalists often lack the support they need when they feel threatened: "Lawyers are often reluctant to take our cases because they fear to be caught in the crossfire." Rather, journalists find support by NGOs, Xharra

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added. **Bartosz Wieliński**, Foreign Policy Editor at the Polish daily “Gazeta Wyborcza”, painted a bleak picture of the situation of media freedom in Poland: “It feels like back in the 80s. Media are subordinate to the government and Polish government propaganda dominates the news.”

Fake news reinforces the general distrust in the media

Fake news and propaganda play an increasingly important role in the public debate. In the second panel discussion “Journalism as a battlefield”, moderated by Christian Spahr, it was discussed how far disinformation has progressed and which countermeasures are available. The discussion was opened by **Beata Biały**, Senior Expert of the Latvian think tank NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. “The creators of fake news want us to distrust and believe in nothing”, warned Biały. The best way to stop fake news is to raise consciousness about disinformation, invest in education, promote dialogue within the media industry and create appropriate regulation.

Dimitar Vatsov, President of the Bulgarian “Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia (HSSF)” spoke about pro-Russian propaganda in the country. He argued that it was only partially orchestrated by the Kremlin itself. For profit reasons, local media oligarchs are equally involved in pro-Russian propaganda. This could be seen also in the Republic of Moldova, said Nadine Gogu, Executive Director of the Independent Journalism Center (IJC) in Chişinău. **Dragan Sekulovski**, Executive Director of the Association of Journalists in Macedonia, and **Karolin Schwarz**, reporter with “Correctiv” in Berlin, introduced the audience to different approaches to debunk fake news. According to Sekulovski, this requires credible media, constant support of Press Councils and promotion of media literacy within the society. In his view the state should help to provide a safe environment for journalists.

Deterioration of public debates in Europe

The third panel, “European public sphere – media responsibility and media literacy”, focused on how journalists and political stakeholders can initiate better public debates. **Otmar Lahodynsky** from the Austrian magazine “Profil” moderated the discussion. **Bertrand Pecquerie**, CEO of the Global Editors Network (GEN), called in his keynote for not complaining about the changes in the media market, but accepting them and actively using new technologies. Pecquerie acknowledged that today’s audience is more heterogeneous and that journalists have to achieve more with the same salary. But with new technologies such as blockchains and artificial intelligence, the audiences could be reached in a new way. **Lejla Turčilo**, Professor of journalism at the University of Sarajevo, presented a study from Bosnia and Herzegovina which shows an increasing self-censorship in the media, lack of solidarity among journalists and lack of media literacy among the population.

Francesco de Filippo, a journalist from the Italian news agency ANSA, lamented the increasing coverage of banalities and rumours and the lack of investigative reports. “We do not need more political talk shows, but better ones.” **Sandra Križanec** from the TV channel “N1 Zagreb” spoke about political pressure in the media sector and how it shapes the public debate.

Ten years KAS Media Program South East Europe in Bulgaria

During SEEMF, the KAS Media Program South East Europe celebrated its tenth anniversary in Bulgaria. Since 2007, it has been based in Sofia and manages its activities from the Bulgarian capital. They include public debates on media freedom and diversity, training of journalists and events on political communication, which were showed in a short [video](#). Long-time partners **Oliver Vujović** and **Orlin Spassov**, Head of the Media Democracy Foundation, talked about their cooperation with KAS and gave an assessment of future trends in media development cooperation.

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New multimedia formats as a possible recipe for success for journalism in 2020

Another expert panel dealt with concepts how journalists can work more effectively in the future. **Kristina Baxanova**, news anchor at the Bulgarian broadcaster bTV, moderated the discussion "Journalism 2020 – factors of success in difficult conditions". "We are in the golden age of journalism!"

This is how **Sumaiya Omar**, co-founder of "Hashtag Our Stories", started her keynote speech. She explained how journalists can use apps like Snapchat and Instagram Stories in their work. The functions of social networks could be used in a breaking news situation, when a news team cannot be on the spot immediately. "Journalists are irreplaceable because they provide the context," said **Ivan Lovreček**, Deputy Managing Director and Editor-in-Chief of RTL Croatia. "However, one must be open to new business models," he added. The investigative journalist and co-founder of the Ukrainian platform "Slidstvo.Info" **Anna Babinets** said that investigative journalism is very popular in Ukraine, but also expensive and international donors are needed. **Prof. Dr. Johannes Weberling**, Professor of Media Law at the European University Viadrina (Frankfurt / Oder), presented the concept of media cooperatives as an alternative form of organisation for independent journalism.

The venue of XII. SEEMF will be Tirana

Thomas Schnöll, Head of the Press and Information Department of the Austrian Foreign Ministry, emphasised that a new understanding between the media and governments is necessary to counteract the loss of confidence on both sides. "It needs a better cooperation", he said. The closing speeches were given by **Barbara Fabro**, Senior Executive Officer of CEI, **Oliver Vujović** (SEEMO) and **Christian Spahr** (KAS). They announced that the next South East Europe Media Forum is expected to take place in Tirana.