

**MEDIA PROGRAM**  
**SOUTH EAST EUROPE**  
 CHRISTIAN SPAHR  
 DENICA ZHELEVA

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## Media forum SEEMF: Is quality demanded – and also affordable?

250 JOURNALISTS, MEDIA EXPERTS AND INDUSTRY REPRESENTATIVES IN DISCUSSION AT THE LARGEST MEDIA CONFERENCE IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE

**Debates about press freedom and freedom of opinion are sometimes extremely one-dimensional, without taking into account the economic foundations for quality journalism. At the seventh "South East Europe Media Forum" on October 7th and 8th 2013 in Sarajevo the KAS Media Program South East Europe placed these questions in the centre of discussion.**

The circumstances for a discussion about media, economics and democracy in South East Europe could hardly be more challenging than at present. To mention a few key aspects: The print media of individual countries are up to 90 percent in the hands of one group of proprietors. There are hidden subsidies for particular media, fed in part illegitimately from EU funds. In addition, there are too many titles for too few readers, too many radio stations for too few listeners – and too few fresh business ideas for a market undergoing radical change through the Internet.

To throw light on the real situation with regard to transparency in the media industry and the prospects for quality journalism, the KAS and its partners had invited all well-known experts of the region: politicians, ambassadors, media managers, academic specialists, investigative reporters and specialists from the trade associations. In addition to the KAS, the annual Forums are organised by the South East European Media Organisation (SEEMO) and the Central European Initiative (CEI), an inter-

governmental organisation of the states of Central Eastern Europe.

The Conference was opened by Christian Spahr, Director of the KAS Media Program South East Europe, the CEI-General Secretary Margit Westfält, the SEEMO-General Secretary Oliver Vujović and Borca Rudić, General Secretary of the Bosnian Association of Journalists.

Dunja Mijatović, CSCE Commissioner for Media Freedom, recalled at the beginning of the Forum, that media freedom means freedom to express opinion – a basic right of every citizen and essential for every democratic state. Media freedom could and must be guaranteed by political commitment and an independent system of justice. Together with Mijatović, Andris Kesteris, an expert on expansion with the European Commission, also argued that this is the only way to achieve sustained implementation of shared European values in South East Europe. The Commission attached particular importance to the observance of freedom of opinion and of the media.

### **Bosnian Head of State gives public interview to journalists**

On the first day of the conference a lively podium discussion took place concerning the media situation in the host country. This was introduced by a public interview by a number of journalists with Željko Komšić, the Chairman of Bosnia and Herzegovina's

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collective presidency, who also gave an address in the context of the opening panel.

A highlight of the 7th SEEMF was the awarding on the evening of the 7th October of the CEI-SEEMO Award for Investigative Journalism, which the KAS has supported as co-organiser. Mahir Šahinović (Sarajevo) and Rosen Tsvetkov (Sofia) were awarded the prize for their researches. Šahinović had uncovered a case of international financial manipulations between the Balkans, Switzerland and Germany. Tsvetkov produced highly regarded reports in Bulgaria concerning attempts to buy votes in elections and the comportment of radical forces vis-à-vis citizens' protests. The "Investigative Reporting Project Italy" (IRPI) received a special mention. 41 journalists from 11 countries were nominated for the prize.

**German Ambassador in Bulgaria supports transparency in the industry**

"Transparency" emerged as the key word in analysing problems in the media industry during the SEEMF. Ambassador of transparency at this year's SEEMF was a real ambassador. Matthias Höpfner, German Ambassador in Sofia, became an unwilling symbol of press freedom in Bulgaria in 2013 after editors of a newspaper made deletions from an interview with critical passages and he made this public. Höpfner called in Sarajevo for the introduction of more economic transparency in the media industry. Responsibility and trust could develop only on the basis of transparency – the framework of free, independent media.

**Media companies can survive only with flexibility and quality**

Prominent speakers like Veran Matić, founder of the Serbian TV and Radio broadcaster B92, and Florian Nehm, expert on sustainability of the Axel-Springer-Verlag, were in agreement on one point: due to the economic crisis and the rapidly changing market situation, media companies can survive only with a high degree of flexibility, well-thought-out strategies and high-value content.

Quality journalism must also be fostered though a value-oriented process of training of journalists – this was an aspect of the last panel on 8th October. The well-known Bulgarian TV moderator and producer Boyko Vassilev warned: "Superficiality can soon replace censorship on the danger scale." If we did not put an end to the tendency to "tabloidization" of media, societal values would potentially remain alien for future generations. Media were also mediators of values, and journalism was a value-oriented profession which involved a high degree of responsibility towards society.

The conference attracted great interest in the media. The South East Europe Media Forum was reported not only by journalists of all Balkan countries but, among others, also by media from Germany and Austria.

The SEEMF has taken place annually since 2007 in different locations and is the largest media conference in South East Europe. It aims to promote exchange and network-building among leading journalists and producers of media. The next South East Media Forum should take place in October 2014 in Skopje (Macedonia).



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