

Promoting European values and standards in the media

The cooperation of KAS with media representatives and politicians was the main topic of an interview with Christian Spahr, Head of the Media Program South East Europe. It was conducted by the student Michelle Trimborn as part of her master thesis at the European University Viadrina (Frankfurt/Oder).

Michelle Trimborn: The KAS Media Program South East Europe exists since 2005. Its office is located in Sofia since 2007. Other organisations are engaged in enhancing media freedom as well. At the same time, Bulgaria continues to drop out in the press freedom rankings for years now. Would you say that the media support is ineffective?

Christian Spahr: We risk deluding ourselves, if we think that the German experience can directly be transferred to other countries. Our main objective is to work with individuals and institutions which share our political values. Not only the values of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), but common European values. The countries in South East Europe are still undergoing a transformation process.

Bulgaria is, for example, an EU member state and has already adopted European structures, but such profound changes need a long period of time. The media and economic systems still need to be adjusted to the new conditions. We would like to support this transition process, together with other NGOs and foundations from Germany and other European countries. The USA is also active in this process. We have

to realise that the situation is not automatically improving when a country is on its way to EU accession or has already acquired EU membership. There are also setbacks – which of course have to be analysed. Misunderstandings can arise in regard to the media freedom. Bulgaria is ranked at 106th place in the freedom of the press index compiled by Reporters Without Borders. This rating is unsatisfactory for an EU member. However, the low rating of Bulgaria is not due to systematic harassment of journalists, but it is predominantly a result of the difficult conditions in the media sector in general.

The topic of media ownership is widely discussed – a monopolisation process can be observed, especially in the field of print media. Media owners are very often not publicists in a Central European understanding, but rather actors from the economic and public sphere who take advantage of the media, in order to pursue their own economic and political interests. Such media owners are not interested in quality journalism or critical reporting. They engage in relationships with influential people, which is not a good basis for independent reporting. In this respect, our main task is to analyse the aforementioned tendencies and conditions, together with partners from Bulgaria and other countries. Our primary purpose is to bring all relevant media actors, including journalists, media owners, politicians and independent media experts together and to foster dialogue among them. Thus, we are raising awareness for media freedom. Another aspect of our work is offering individual

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training courses for journalists who want to work in a better and more independent manner. In this field we are promoting investigative journalism, because it contributes to more transparency in politics, business and society.

Do you think that the EU should do more in the field of media freedom? Should it increase its support for Bulgaria in this process? Moreover, the current EU funding is often being criticised. The financial aid is repeatedly not distributed in a fair manner, according to critical media.

How media freedom could be translated into reality is a subject undergoing an intense discussion in the European Union. In the EU enlargement process, political stability is emphasised, which is definitely important. Though, I consider that such factors as media freedom and the rule of law are getting more important, especially during the current rounds of enlargement. These issues will hopefully come back on the agenda at negotiations with the Western Balkan countries. It is of a great importance for the credibility of the European Union to bear those developments in mind. The EU has also a significant influence over the subsidies. However, just because media freedom is declining, the financial support for the agricultural sector cannot be suspended. This cannot be done in practice, if you want to comply with the EU standards. But there are also EU funds allocated to the media sector. For example, in infrastructural projects the EU uses a small amount of the budget for the information of the public. These budgets should be transparently distributed, if media outlets from the South Eastern European countries participate in information campaigns. In this regard, there are still deficits.

How do you see your role as a German or foreign organisation in Bulgaria? Would you assess the dialogue with the government as more difficult compared to Bulgarian organisations?

Basically, our working conditions in Bulgaria as well as those in other South Eastern European countries are very good. In many countries the exchange with Germany is highly demanded, due to the fact that we are recognised as supporters for achieving European conditions. Bulgaria is already a member of the European Union, but the political dialogue with Germany is identified as really important. In this kind of dialogue the German foundations and NGOs play a very active role. We are supporting the political exchange and also have a good access to the political elites, which we tend to use to promote stability and enhance common European values in many areas. In this respect, the doors are wide-open for political exchange with Germany.

Of course, the German political models and examples cannot be directly transferred to other countries – but valuable suggestions can be provided. In Germany, guidance and support of other countries was needed for rebuilding the political system after the Second World War. With this background in mind, we can contribute to the EU integration of the South East European countries.

Do you think that you have greater influence in Bulgaria since the office of the KAS Media Program is situated there? Are you more present in Bulgaria than in the other countries, in which the KAS Media Program is operating?

KAS operates in two different ways: On the one hand, there are country offices in numerous states which support the bilateral political dialogue between Germany and the respective country. On the other hand, there are two regional programmes. One of them is the Media Program, focusing on ten countries – most of the member states of former Yugoslavia as well as Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova. For the same region, there is a Rule of Law Program based in Bucharest. The KAS offices in the region work together on mutual topics. The analysis of the media landscape is always carried out in cooperation with the KAS country offices. The main task of the Media Program is to connect journalists with media

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experts from different countries and to create a regional dialogue. These activities can be complemented at the national level through the KAS country offices. Hence, the KAS activities are performed as collaboration between the different structures.

For us it is important not only to transfer information and know-how from Germany to South East Europe, but also to reinforce the exchange of best practices between South East European countries. In the media sector or in the sphere of political communication, there are sometimes good approaches in one country which could work as well in another country of the region. Establishing such dialogue is an important objective of our work.

In the cooperation with journalists, do you see your role of a political foundation differently compared to the role of a NGO? Do you have the impression that partners are reluctant to work with political foundations or do they highly respect it the organisation as such?

We have a dialogue-oriented approach and are not providing ready-made solutions for other countries. But we look for the exchange, make suggestions and we do not expect that the German model will be copied. This is the approach which we try to apply and which I would like to recommend. Overall, we have a good reputation as a German institution in South East Europe. There is a high level of interest towards us, on which we can build and create viable networks. Our work follows the approach of promoting European values and standards in the media sector.

You are working closely with local NGOs. Who initiates this partnership, can you describe the cooperation more precisely?

We do not just give funds to Bulgarian or other Southeast European NGOs. This means that our cooperation is not based only on the approval of projects proposals and the subsequent financial support, but on identifying our own focal points in a dialogue with journalists and media experts

from the region. We develop our work programme independently, but look for local and regional partners. For example, for conducting studies we usually work together with scientists or NGOs from the region. Sometimes we organise seminars and workshops on our own. But when it comes to larger conferences, as for example the South East Europe Media Forum, the largest media conference in Southeast Europe, we work together with other international organisations, in order to manage such a conference which has between 300 and 400 participants.

You are organising conferences and trainings as well as conducting studies. Are some of the activities better accepted whereas others – less appealing?

Of course, we should put under scrutiny our own activities and develop new formats, but, in principle, the trainings as well as the conferences and scientific studies are generally very well perceived. Certainly, we must ensure right from the beginning that new initiatives are made public, but we can regularly contribute to the political debate in the region with conferences and studies on media freedom. The respective events are usually very well attended, not only by journalists and media experts, but also by students or interested citizens.

... leading to a greater influence on the civil society?

As KAS Media Program we target primarily groups of experts – journalists, media experts from NGOs and universities, but also politicians and their spokespersons. Nevertheless, we publish the outcomes of our work on our homepage. We are active in social media and would like to make our publications as accessible and transparent as possible, in order to address as many citizens as possible with our topics.

(The text has been shortened. The title of the master thesis of Michelle Trimborn is "Foreign media assistance in Bulgaria – actors, measures, solutions", Sofia, 2015).



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