

## More diversity through alternative media projects

AT INVITATION OF THE KAS MEDIA PROGRAM, THE "ARTICLE 10 ECHR TASK FORCE" MEETS TO DISCUSS BUSINESS MODELS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA

**The "Article 10 ECHR Task Force", named after the European Convention on Human Rights, is dealing with media freedom and media legislation in South East Europe. At the invitation of the KAS Media Program, the experts from ten countries met and debated about perspectives for alternative media projects in the region. The workshop took place 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> of September in Sofia.**

**Christian Spahr**, Head of the KAS Media Program South East Europe, opened the seminar and expressed his concern regarding the further decrease of trust in media in the region. Nevertheless, many independent media initiatives have been started in the last years. Spahr was optimistic that these projects would contribute to more transparency in politics, economy and society.

**Prof. Dr. Johannes Weberling**, founder of the task force and professor for media law at Viadrina European University in Frankfurt (Oder), Germany, shared his view on increasing media diversity through new media projects. In this regard, new legal forms for media were also discussed. The legal form of a cooperative such as the "European Cooperative Society" (SCE) was introduced as a possible alternative for media. Prof. Dr. Weberling outlined that the principle of cooperatives "one member, one vote" should be implemented in the internal structure of such projects. Members would be involved in the decision-making and influences from outside could be eliminated more effectively. While in Germany the idea

of cooperatives has Christian and liberal roots, the term "cooperative" is rather being associated with the communist past in South East Europe. Therefore, the concept should be brought in a new context in order to be successfully applied in the region and in the media sector.

### Panel discussion about alternative business models for quality journalism

Alternative media projects run by NGO's or associations already exist, but sustainable funding is difficult. The participants agreed on the fact that a long-term business model needs to be found in any case; only in this way independent reporting could be guaranteed. Different kinds of revenues can be combined: from private or public sources; international organisations could be also involved. Such mixed funding could bring more neutrality. "A huge challenge is to convince citizens to pay for quality journalism," commented the Hungarian media expert **Dr. Gábor Polyák**.

On 15<sup>th</sup> of December a panel discussion took place in the framework of the seminar with the aim to introduce this topic to a broader audience. Prof. Dr. Johannes Weberling, KAS Bulgaria Director Thorsten Geissler, investigative journalist Miranda Patručić from the "Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project" (OCCRP) in Sarajevo, as well as the international editor of the Bulgarian media platform "KlinKlin", Ruslan Trad, and Communication Director of Freedom House Romania, Gelu Trandafir

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took part in the debate. The discussion was moderated by Christian Spahr.

**Thorsten Geissler** underlined that without an appropriate legal framework in the media sector, good journalism was difficult to obtain. Moreover, he said that the EU guaranteed the right of freedom of expression as a basis for a functional democracy.

“Important aspects of independent media initiatives are their legal form and business concept,” commented **Christian Spahr**. There were different funding opportunities such as crowdfunding and international donors. As for the legal forms, besides NGOs, the model of the cooperative could be an option. **Prof. Dr. Weberling** presented this legal form during the public discussion.

### Successful projects need new ideas and the highest professional standards

**Miranda Patručić, Ruslan Trad and Gelu Trandafir** shared insights from their practical experience. **Patručić** gave examples for the work of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), a well-known international journalistic network. She said that legal support and professional training “on the job” were crucial for independent media projects. **Trad** expressed his concern that precisely in Bulgaria many freelance journalists were suffering from the lack of legal support. In addition, he presented the multimedia platform “KlinKlin”. **Trandafir** made clear that investigative reporters in his country have become influential. He gave examples of corruption cases in which investigative research of journalists has led to police investigations and court decisions. The speakers agreed that every successful media project needed dedicated journalists, new ideas and a deep understanding of professionalism.

Following the discussion, the experts formulated several recommendations regarding the legal framework and professional standards of such initiatives.

Notable for the legal model of a media cooperative is:

- Stick to the fundamental principle “**one member, one vote**”.
- A media cooperative should be **profit-oriented**; fair competition strengthens media outlets.
- Financing should be mixed in order to have a **sustainable business model**: from public and private sources, as well as from international partners. The project should be **legally independent** from the state.
- The concept should be in accordance with core values of the cooperatives, however flexible and **adapted to the local context**.

Further recommendations were made regarding the application of professional standards and the internal organisation of alternative media outlets:

- All basic ethical principles of independent reporting should be followed and facts should be accurately reviewed in order **to establish credibility**.
- **Relations between managing board and employees should be clearly defined**. This can be eased up by formulating rights and obligations in written form as well as guidelines for the daily work of journalists.
- It is a priority to ensure **legal support for journalists**. This can be in form of legal protection insurance or through support of NGOs specialised in this area.

The members of the “Article 10 ECHR Task Force” came to the conclusion that sustainable new media initiatives can foster quality journalism in South East Europe. Next meeting of the task force is expected to be in February 2017, during the 14<sup>th</sup> edition of Frankfurt Days on Media Law in Frankfurt (Oder).

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