

Media assistance needs long-term orientation

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIAN SPAHR, HEAD OF THE KAS MEDIA PROGRAM SOUTH EAST EUROPE, ABOUT MEDIA SUPPORT OF INTERNATIONAL NGO'S

The media situation in South East Europe and international media assistance were topics of an interview with Christian Spahr, Head of the KAS Media Program South East Europe, as part of a master thesis at the George Washington University, Washington, D.C. („Post-Conflict Transition and Media Development: The Role of International Media Assistance“). Spahr introduced the activities of the KAS Media Program to Iris Froeba, author of the study.

Iris Froeba: What are the most significant developments with regard to the media sector in the region?

Christian Spahr: One significant development is certainly that the media markets are liberalised and a lot of private media outlets have emerged. Nowadays, there are less state-owned media than private ones.

After the collapse of communism, most South East European countries were able to introduce media legislation that complies with European standards. Independent media supervisory authorities for broadcasters were established. Formally, media laws are complying with Western standards, but the implementation of many media reforms can still be seen critical. In general, the legal framework does not reflect the reality since many rules are not implemented in practice. In addition, self-regulation is often weak, if we think about the effectiveness of press councils or ethical commissions. There are good examples, however, like in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In principle, it is possible for journalists to report freely and independently in most countries of South East Europe, since freedom of expression and freedom of media are guaranteed by law. There is no systematic repression of critical journalists in most of the Balkan states. Nevertheless, the media landscapes in the region still have a poor reputation. Monopolisation in the newspaper sector, inefficient legal regulation and self-regulation are criticised by many experts. Media freedom is restricted by scattered pressure from a variety of political stakeholders and advertising customers, as well as by unstable employment conditions and self-censorship.

From your point of view, what are the major obstacles to developing an independent media in the region?

Major obstacles are the difficult economic conditions and the ownership of media. Many media outlets, especially print media, are in the red. A lot of traditional media as newspapers and TV are owned by oligarchs or business people with political ambitions, who use media for their own political and economic interests and campaigns. In many cases, the real owner of a media outlet is not clearly identifiable.

Another obstacle is self-censorship. Journalists in the region often state that in their media outlet, reporting about certain topics, persons or companies is not possible or only with a determined tendency. Moreover, many journalists complain about

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

MEDIA PROGRAM
SOUTH EAST EUROPE
 CHRISTIAN SPAHR

March 2017

www.kas.de/medien-europa/en

pressure from politicians, media owners and advertisers on their work.

Furthermore, there are shortcomings in the framework conditions. In individual countries, the legal framework is deficient, e.g. Bulgaria is lacking a press code. Often, there are no binding collective labour agreements for employment contracts, a weak self-regulation, and a lack of solidarity within the profession.

Above all, political reporting is often biased. There is a lack of fairness and professional standards. For improving the situation, a consensus amongst major media managers and editors would be needed to agree on basic journalistic and ethical standards, in order to improve the reputation of the media sector.

What are the biggest challenges to media assistance in the region?

Changes in political culture cannot happen overnight. Media assistance providers cannot expect that everything changes with their appearance in the country. Media freedom is strongly connected to a democratic culture. The situation is not automatically improving as soon as a country is on its way to EU accession or even when it has already acquired EU membership. There are also setbacks – which of course have to be analysed. Therefore, media development cooperation cannot be on a short term basis only, but rather long term efforts are needed.

In general, foreign assistance in the media sector is welcomed in the Western Balkans, since it is mostly seen as a support on the way towards European standards. However, political models cannot be just copied. Therefore, media assistance should rather give advice, examples and suggestions. Foundations and NGOs should foster dialogue. At least this is the approach of the KAS Media Program South East Europe. We are supporting the political exchange and also have a good access to the political elites. We are using these contacts, in order to promote stability and enhance common European values in many areas.

Concerning our approach, the KAS Media Program does not just give funds to South East European NGOs. Our cooperation is not only based on the approval of project 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 academics 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 South East Europe, we work together with other international organisations, in order to manage such a conference which has between 300 and 400 participants.

What kind of projects and areas of specialisation do you think are most successful?

The KAS Media Program South East Europe is pursuing a regional strategy and trying to foster the regional dialogue by connecting journalists and media experts from different countries. We consider this as most fruitful since there are often approaches in one country which could be similarly applied in another country, due to their comparable situation. Therefore, professional exchange of experiences is very important and can be successful.

Apart from enhancing the dialogue among journalists, media experts and political communicators, we offer trainings to journalists who want to do their job better and more independently. This contributes to making politics, economy and societies more transparent.

We are not only offering trainings, but also organising conferences and conducting studies on different media topics, e.g. media ethics, investigative journalism, media legislation and self-regulation.

Due to current developments in the region and a decline in media freedom, as for

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

MEDIA PROGRAM
SOUTH EAST EUROPE
 CHRISTIAN SPAHR

March 2017

www.kas.de/medien-europa/en



Imprint

Konrad Adenauer Stiftung
 Media Program South East Europe

19, Konrad Adenauer St.
 1st floor, apt. 2
 1504 Sofia
 Bulgaria

Phone +359 2 94249-71
 Fax +359 2 94249-79
media.europe@kas.de

example observed by the Media Sustainability Index, do you think investment in media assistance will increase in the region over the next years?

Giving a prognosis on investments is very difficult, since there is a lack of reliable data on funding in this field in general, even for previous periods. Mainly, because donors do not really share information on funding among themselves, and there is no central evaluation. Additionally, media support is sometimes a component of larger projects. However, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) database provides figures on how much Official Development Assistance (ODA) a country received. This database also gives information on the media sector. Between 2010 and 2013, there was a steady decrease of aid in the media sector in South East Europe, with a low point in 2013. In 2014 the investment in media development cooperation rose again. The results for 2015 are not published yet, therefore it is difficult to estimate if 2014 was the starting point for a new trend upwards.

In more general terms, will global investment in media assistance increase over the next years or will more funds be made available for other areas of foreign assistance?

There are no estimates on the investments for the next years, but OECD data shows that the overall level of development assistance is quite stable, including media support. Having this in mind, global investments in media assistance will most probably stay stable in the next years, too. However, we have to see that media support only accounts for less than one percent of the total amount of development aid. Geopolitical challenges might urge Western governments to increase their investment in media development cooperation, in order to answer to propaganda by opponents of open societies such as the Kremlin and others.

The interview has been conducted in March 2016. The master thesis of Iris Froeba has been published in May 2016.