

Opening session SEEMF 2015

New Foundations for Good Journalism

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Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Colleagues and Friends,

Freedom and money cannot be considered in separation from each other. This is particularly true in the media industry. Only if media have a secure financial basis and a professional business model they can be independent, and concentrate on their core activity of helping citizens to form their own opinions on the basis of verified information. The media are the most important mediators of democracy.

Yet citizens' trust in the media is at rock bottom. Only 28 percent of Romanians believe that the media report independently. In Bulgaria, it is only 17 percent, and I am sure the results would be similar in many countries in the region. These figures are taken from representative samples of more than 1,000 citizens in surveys by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

The aim of this conference is not primarily to complain about the decline in quality journalism. Pessimism is of no help to an industry facing radical changes. The aim should be to discuss which business models still function under the pressure of the digital revolution and what new ideas there are for developing an independent journalism, oriented to the needs of the public.

In new EU states and countries undergoing transformation there are special challenges – the polarisation of the media landscape which is a reflection of political conflicts, the editorial influence of oligarchs, politicians and older, surviving cliques.

And yet South East Europe cannot escape the influence of global trends. The same questions about the future present themselves here as in Berlin, Paris and the USA. How can traditional media market their content in the Internet? Who determines the rules for online journalism: elected governments or multinational IT companies? On balance, does the Internet bring more risks or opportunities for the media industry? The existence of many print media is threatened, or they have already had to close because their circulations have collapsed. We will discuss whether newspapers have any prospect of continuing to be successful, and how critical journalists can finance their work independently. We need new foundations for good journalism.

The fact is, media can only be successful in the long term if they have the support of their public. Whoever loses their confidence, in the course of time, also loses influence. It is therefore of decisive importance that journalists develop a new, better relationship with their readers and audiences. Reporters and editors today are not only transmitters of information but also receivers. They must listen to their public. A professional journalist does not just say what his readers want to hear but takes advantage of constructive criticism and is responsive to suggestions for issues to address.

We are discussing these questions with publishers, managing editors, TV presenters, directors of NGOs and representatives of the Internet industry. The most important media of South East Europe are here with us, together with experts from Google, Axel Springer, RTL and other leading media concerns.

I wish you all a most interesting and diverse conference.
Thank you very much for your attention.