

Welcome address

Shedding light on the past – a responsibility for media

Christian Spahr, Director Media Program South East Europe

Dear colleagues, partners and friends,
Dear citizens of Tirana,

Be welcome here today at the invitation of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, or, shortly, KAS. The Media Program South East Europe of our NGO is supporting quality journalism, media diversity and modern political communication in ten countries of the region. The event today is organised in cooperation with the “Article 10 ECHR Task Force” at the University of Frankfurt (Oder) in Germany. This expert group, led by Professor Johannes Weberling, is inspired by the ideas of the European Convention for Human Rights.

These days, Professor Weberling and KAS have gathered in Tirana a group of 15 international experts in media law and self-regulation to discuss a very topical issue: How can media contribute to deal with the past, and how can media deal with their own past? As we all know, the societies in South East Europe haven't fully come to terms with the communist era yet. Speaking about the region as a whole, there is no broad consensus when it comes to an overall judgement of this period. Conclusions are missing in schoolbooks; museums and memorials about the recent past are scarce. Not only in the media sector, experts and citizens complain that insider networks from those times are still powerful.

In some countries of the region, the challenge of media to deal with the past is a double one. Some of the former Yugoslav countries have experienced terrible wars in the 1990s. Journalists, in many cases, were not only reporters, but active participants in campaigns.

In Germany, as you know, dealing with the past was and still is a big challenge for politics and society. For this task, we even have a special term - “Vergangenheitsbewältigung”. This word is not easy to translate into other languages. In English “coming to terms with the past” would come closest. Coming to terms with a country's political past and coming to terms with the past of its media is closely linked, as the mass media are a key in changing public opinion. It is only with their support that a general acceptance of democratic structures, not to mention a new perception of history, can be achieved.

This is why the debate about media and the past is so important. Only if media accept the challenge to make the recent past more transparent, only if they help citizens to draw conclusions from totalitarian experiences and military conflicts, we can build a true democracy.

In order to shed more light on the recent past, journalists need good framework conditions. They need to have access to official documents, especially secret service files. They need a legal basis which encourages or at least tolerates investigative reporting. But also the professional community of journalists can contribute to coming to terms with the past. Press councils can issue guidelines for ethical reporting, and media outlets are asked to discuss their roles in dark moments of dictatorship and war.

I appreciate the fact that different organisations in Albania are currently addressing this topic. OSCE invited more than 40 journalists and media experts last week, and our partner institute IDMC with its director Jonila Godole will host a public conference on 9th and 10th November.

We will first hear introductory speeches by Professor Weberling and Jonila Godole, and then discuss the topic with further panellists – and all of you who are interested in the Q&A session.

I would now like to invite Prof. Weberling to give his keynote. Thank you all for your attention.