



## Хендрик Зитих, KAS: Има шанс за сериозен разговор колко е важна свободата на медиите



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# Hendrik Sittig, KAS: "There is a chance of serious conversation about how important media freedom is"

Translation of the interview with Hendrik Sittig, Head of KAS Media Programme South East Europe, for the Bulgarian news portal „Dnevnik“, published on 21<sup>st</sup> of October 2020. Link to the original interview in Bulgarian: <https://bit.ly/2HmYAiG>

***Hendrik Sittig has been heading the regional programme bureau, opened 13 years ago, of the Media Programme South East Europe of the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung or KAS) in difficult times for the media in Bulgaria and the countries throughout the region. Difficult times for Bulgarian democracy as well. Dnevnik is talking with him about the anniversary of German reunification, the activities of the Media Programme, deficits and clichés in the media environment, the European Commission’s rule of law report and good Bulgarian journalism.***

Dnevnik: It has been 30 years since German reunification. You were born in the former GDR and today you are dealing with the delicate topic of media freedom in several countries in the region. Knowing the state of the media in most of these countries, did you think that you would ever have to watch not how democracy is built, but how it is dismantled?

HS: First of all, I am glad that German reunification happened 30 years ago, because for me, and I guess for almost all Germans, it was a happy event. The GDR was certainly not a state governed by the rule of law, and today we are extremely happy to live in a free, peaceful and democratic Germany. This is a country where media freedom is a principle written in capital letters.

I was 14 years old when the Berlin Wall fell, and I would say I was very lucky because the reunification came for me at the right time. I was young enough not to be integrated into the GDR system, but old enough to understand what was happening. And since I lived also under the old system, I am very sensitive when it comes to freedom, democratic values and the rule of law. That is why, especially as a journalist, it hurts me to see that – unfortunately, in the countries of the European Union as well – the level of media freedom is low.

We all know about the famous 111<sup>th</sup> place of Bulgaria in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranking and it has been there unchanged for 3 years. This is extremely, extremely sad for an EU country.

**Dnevnik: I'm afraid that "111<sup>th</sup> place" is starting to become a cliché and therefore lose its effect on the people who need to make a change. What is your impression?**

HS: I know that in Bulgaria there are forces that question this place in the ranking. Yes, the RSF system is a bit complicated. It takes into account also factors such as media pluralism, the economic framework and access to information. But Reporters Without Borders proceed from the same principle in the ranking of all countries, and 111<sup>th</sup> place is at least a signal that something is wrong with the media environment in Bulgaria.

And looking at how this place has been preserved for years, seeing the development since 2006, when Bulgaria was in 35<sup>th</sup> place, and how sharply it is dropping in this ranking, I wonder: Why? Why are the responsible factors in this country on whom this depends not doing what is necessary to end this – I hesitate to say it with this word – disgrace for Bulgaria?

Media freedom belongs to the foundation of any democratic society, it is a task for the whole society. Every democratically thinking person, every democrat must work for this freedom. The state of affairs is an appeal, a call to all who must do something. The Media Programme of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has always been open and we offer our expertise and support to change this.

**Dnevnik: And it is not the RSF ranking alone – for years, signals have also been sent from places like the European Commission, the Council of Europe...**

HS: Yes, that is right. At the moment in Europe there is some focus on Bulgaria for the situation in society in general. That is why I think that an "opportunity window" is opening right now to talk about media freedom as well, how important this topic is.

**Dnevnik: The word "disgrace" that you used, sounded like your attempt to describe the media problem in a concentrated expression. And what is the response of the KAS Media Programme to its resolution? Why is that?**

The Media Programme of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung exists since 13 years and our focus is set on the media freedom and journalism. There are three main topics we work on: the qualification of journalists, the framework conditions for their work – by which I mainly mean pluralism and media freedom – and political communication. I will focus on the first two topics.

**Firstly**, we need to be aware that journalism is a craft. I myself studied journalism, was qualified as an editor and worked as a journalist for many years. The basis of quality journalistic work is that journalists must have learned their craft well. That is why we organise seminars and trainings, for example, for mobile journalism and media law, i.e. we work for the qualification of journalists, to master their craft better. This year we started something important – a scholarship programme for journalism students in Bulgaria.

The **second** topic, which is perhaps even more important, is the conditions of the media environment, which we talk about with editors-in-chief, publishers and politicians. Our programme covers South East Europe and we must state that Bulgaria is not an isolated case of a problem with media freedom. All other countries have similar problems with small nuances. This is due to the process of transition to free and democratic states, and it is certainly not easy. But it has been 30 years already since the system changed and, unfortunately, we have been witnessing a decline in democracy for some time.



**Dnevnik: And what is the answer of a German, why this is happening in South East Europe?**

HS: That brings me back to the beginning of our conversation. In the GDR it was the same as in the other Soviet Bloc countries. We went through the same process and in Germany the transformation proved successful. Our immediate neighbour was the rich West Germany, which brought with the unification values such as freedom and democracy directly to the former GDR, there was no distance. Yes, there are many problems in the East German provinces, including the understanding of democracy. We must be aware that there were several generations in the GDR who were “smashed” by this process – in terms of a professional career, in terms of personal experience. This has its impact to this day. I am from the happy generation.

But democracy is not free. Democracy and freedom must be won and defended. Democracy is also linked to the personal responsibility of each individual to society. And we must first learn this.

So, to some extent, I can understand some East Germans who are complaining and still cannot come to terms with the situation three decades after the fall of the Wall. But as an East German, it hurts me a lot to hear that 20 percent, one in five, of West Germans have not yet been to the Eastern provinces. I cannot understand this lack of interest.

However, the big framework is clear – it is the freedom, the democracy in which we live. I am happy that we live in a free, democratic and pluralistic Germany.

**Dnevnik: We have heard enough conversations about how bad the media in Bulgaria are, but this is unfair to the good Bulgarian journalists. This 111<sup>th</sup> place somewhat belittles the achievements of the professionals, those who have learned their craft. Please say two good words about them.**

I am really glad that in Bulgaria, which I have known for more than 2 years now, I meet journalists who, I am convinced, make quality journalism and meet the criteria that I have also

learned. We are looking for such colleagues and partners for our events to support them in the name of quality journalism, which is our main goal.

I will repeat it – there are enough great journalists in Bulgaria whom we are trying to help. You work, for example, in a media outlet that I always mention when we talk about quality media. There are many others.

**Dnevnik: The situation in Bulgaria was compared by the RSF to a “media civil war”?**

HS: It hurts me that the media think in camps and in established categories. But I would not give such an assessment, because it does not help. Stereotyped thinking is toxic to independent journalism. Quality journalism can have only one basis – the principles of serious journalism such as impartiality, objectivity, reliable and thorough study of information and reliable information.

In Bulgaria and the region, I often hear talks about “media critical of the government” and “media close to the government”. This is wrong. I would divide them into quality media working under the principles I have listed, “critical-in-all-directions” media, and at the other pole – the media which consciously take only one side.

**Dnevnik: You listed a lot of the ingredients of the formula for good media, but I do not hear anything about money, about investing in quality media?**

HS: If we go back to the transition in Germany, we must realise that the process went quickly, mainly because of the available money, also in the media sector. In East Germany, the media shifted to Western publishers, and most media outlets from the former GDR still exist. The good media model was immediately exported to East Germany and suddenly the change in consciousness happened – a painful process, as in all other areas.

Yes, quality journalism costs money and it cannot be otherwise. Infrastructure, journalists’ pay, investments, especially now in regard to the digital revolution... These are things that require someone with money to stand behind the good media.

**Dnevnik: We need to make an important clarification – many people say that private media are a private business and owners should take care of them on their own. But the media are a special business, and it is also right for society to realise that it has some responsibility, including material responsibility, to fund good journalism. It also has a responsibility to seek quality journalism.**

HS: The system is complex and acts like the free market – if there is demand, there is supply as well. Each citizen in a democratic society must understand the role of the media. Without independent and impartial information, without free media, there can be no democracy. The role of journalism is to follow the three pillars of democracy honestly and impartially. Voters have different opinions, but the media help them make informed choices. This cannot happen without free media.

You mentioned money, and we need to remind that good media require investors who understand their role in democracy. This also means investing independently of other business interests. Both in history and now there are enough examples – Springer Publishing House in Germany, Jeff Bezos, who bought The Washington Post... People with a lot of money, but who say that free media are important to society, who help the media most likely with the secret belief that their business can only prosper in a free society. There are such publishers both in Bulgaria and other countries, although sometimes I get the impression that they are the “Don Quixotes” of media freedom, fighting with windmills. But it is also a fact that they are fighting in a political environment that attaches little importance to the independent press.

In Germany, we have also had problems with insufficient funding of the media for years. Owners often need to invest in other sectors of the economy as well so that they can continue to financially support their media outlets. Yet the media retain their independence.

**Dnevnik: Part of the conversation about money is also the one about the role of the strong public service media?**

HS: I have worked in public service media in Germany for almost 15 years and I am convinced that they are very important. There must be private media, but there must be also public service media. Every democratic society needs them, but only if they can work independently and are sufficiently funded. In Germany, they are continuously highly trusted, they are given a lot of money because it is realised how important they are and because their production is very good.

The problem with public radio and television in Bulgaria is that they are underfunded and built on a structure that – I will say diplomatically – does not exclude political influence. Which poses a problem. Public media should only work for their audience and should never be a tool in the hands of politics. So I see a lot of room for work and I can share ideas about their funding and supervisory bodies.

**Dnevnik: In October, the rule of law report was widely commented on. Did the European Commission tell us anything about media freedom that we do not already know in Bulgaria?**

HS: Honestly speaking, no. I have been reading the same things for years and nothing has changed. And this is sad.

The only change is putting the focus today much more clearly on the issues, and perhaps right now is the time to work for media freedom. I think that now is the time in Bulgaria to create an informal Alliance for Quality Journalism, set on a broad basis. We will be happy to join with our expertise in creating such an alliance.

**Dnevnik: It seems that the European Commission's report this time helped many Bulgarians to open their eyes and understand that they have to do the real work. The solution will not come from outside, Brussels, Berlin or Paris will not solve the problem of media freedom in Bulgaria. Good arguments can come from abroad, but not much more than that?**

HS: Absolutely! That is right – Bulgarians have to solve their problems on their own here, on the spot. Brussels, based on the European Union's values – and it continues to be a "union of values" – can help as we do with the Media Programme of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. But the problems in individual countries, including Bulgaria, need to be solved by the countries themselves.

**Dnevnik: We have heard the comments and assessments of Bulgarian politicians and government officials about whether there is media freedom in our country. But would you share what journalists tell you about whether they receive information, whether they have normal access to it to work objectively so that they do not have to interpret what they do not know?**

HS: Access to information is the basis of any journalism. That is why it is so important to have it. Yes, I keep hearing from journalists that they have problems with access to information. When they ask government authorities, but also other institutions – they do not want to talk to them at all. This simply should not be the case in a democracy. We have similar problems in Germany, too, but this shows why it is important to have a functioning judicial system that always protects press freedom.



**Dnevnik:** I do not mean the Law on Access to Information only, but that there is information that should be public and accessible immediately. Information is, in a sense, a perishable product, and if you receive it after a court decision months or even years later, you can do a great journalistic investigation, but the damage has already been done to society.

That is right. And yet the court decision is important because it lays the foundation for the work of future generations of journalists. But in this case you are absolutely right. Here we come to the third pillar of the work of the KAS Media Programme – political communication.

**Dnevnik:** Translate it into a language that most people can understand: “I will call Boyko Borissov”?

HS: (laughs) No, you are joking! Political communication means that we also do projects with spokespersons of institutions, ministries and parties. There is much more to be desired for this communication not only in Bulgaria. There has been an improvement in recent years, and again, we are coming back to the topic “access of information”.

Because the other party must also understand that in order to have objective journalism, it is necessary to provide information. There must be a platform for a serious exchange between the media and government structures. It must be understood that the media and politicians are not friends, but they are not enemies. But to this end, there must be a serious and professional “peaceful coexistence”. And there are different mechanisms for it, which I rarely see here.

In Germany, for example, there is a press conference at the federal level three times a week. The government spokesman and his colleagues from the various ministries give information and answer questions from journalists. I emphasize that this is not a government’s press conference, it is organised in Berlin at the invitation of journalists.

**Dnevnik:** Another important issue for this “peaceful coexistence” – we have laws and regulations, but it seems that most of them remain on paper, they are not practiced?

HS: Yes, this is a problem of every law and it exists in Germany as well. But in order to resolve it, we still rely on what has already been said – a functioning judicial system is needed.

And another important thing for quality journalism – we need an atmosphere of acceptance of independent media and the realisation that they are needed. This atmosphere must first

be created by politicians, who are responsible for social development. Chancellor Angela Merkel, for example, maintains a regular video podcast. In May, she spoke in it about why free media were needed. This creates an atmosphere by which many other spheres of society are guided.

Journalists cannot be attacked and insulted. They do nothing but their job. I regret to see what is happening in the United States, one of the oldest democracies. As a media representative, I do not understand or accept how the President of the United States constantly questions media freedom and insults journalists and thus creates an atmosphere unfavourable to them.

**Dnevnik: You gave a lot of examples from Germany. And have you personally, as a German in Sofia, felt here higher demands, expectations or criticism of you because you come from a country with huge influence – but also responsibilities – in Europe? Have you heard “Why don’t you intervene?” or “Why are you interfering?”**

HS: Because of its tragic history in the twentieth century, Germany is responsible for Europe. As a representative of the younger generation, this is this responsibility is something like a genetic predisposition for me. That is why Germans always have a sense of responsibility towards Europe, it is instilled in us by birth. Coming from the former GDR, I say that Germany was very lucky to unite, but that is another reason for the country to be responsible for Europe.

This is also Mrs. Merkel’s understanding, who sees the unification of Europe and peace in Europe as one whole thing. On the other hand, there is a Germany’s responsibility to be a moderator, to balance between different views in Europe and beyond. In this sense, over the past decades, development in Germany has been very positive and our country is something of a beacon that others are guided by in many areas.

I have worked in different countries and have always enjoyed being there as a German, and I have been charged with some responsibility because I am German. People often ask me how we do things in Germany and I share, but – as the Media Programme of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung does – we do not impose it, we offer expertise, we can bring German experts for any platform.

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