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Media Programme South East Europe



Hendrik Sittig: “When democracy is threatened, journalists must also take a stand”

Translation of the interview with the Head of KAS Media Programme South East Europe, for the Montenegrin Media Institute, published on 28th of June 2022. Link to the original interview in Montenegrin: <https://bit.ly/3ubQSGy>

Hendrik Sittig is a journalist himself and worked for many years in public broadcasting in Germany. In the interview, he talks about the importance of strengthening RTCG's independence for the further development of democracy, as well as about the ban on Russian media in view of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine and the fight against disinformation campaigns and fake news.

MMIInstitute: When it comes to media community the main message we hear from all politicians is that without independent media there can be no democracy. However, this is often not the case in our countries. How is it possible to ensure greater independence of the media and especially of the public broadcaster from political influences?

HS: In my opinion, the fundamental problem in most countries in South East Europe, including Montenegro, is the lack of awareness of quality journalism. There is a need for an atmosphere and a social common sense that independent media are essential in democracy. This atmosphere must be created above all by

politicians who bear responsibility for social development in their respective countries. If this happens, concrete problems such as verbal and physical attacks on media representatives, strategic legal actions against research (so-called SLAPP), smear campaigns or more difficult access to public information etc. will also be considerably reduced. It would also strengthen the importance of independent public broadcasting, which I believe is essential for a democracy.

MMInstitute: In Germany, the public broadcaster is financed by citizens through subscription. Is this the right recipe for full independence of RTCG and can we talk about an independent public service as long as it is financed exclusively from the state budget like in Montenegro?

HS: In Germany, as in many other countries, public broadcasting is financed by monthly contributions. This has been a proven and functioning system for decades. However, it must be noted that this model is also the most unpopular among the population and is therefore always up for debate, especially when the contribution is to be increased. This was also confirmed by a study conducted by our KAS Media Programme in all ten Southeast European countries we monitor. In some western countries, such as Denmark and currently in France, the model has just been abolished and is to be abolished. The financing then runs through the state budget. From my point of view, this is the wrong way. If you want to talk about a truly independent public service broadcaster that is committed first and foremost to its audience, the broadcasters must be financed directly by the citizens. But: The most important thing is that the public broadcasting gets enough money to fulfil its social tasks and that its medium-term financing is secured. If this is done through the state budget, it must be clear: The amount of the budget for the public broadcasting must be fixed. It must therefore be ensured that there can be no direct or indirect political influence on the broadcasters through arbitrary financial adjustments.

MMInstitute: Due to the fact that our public broadcaster is financed from the state budget, a part of the representatives of private media are demanding that RTCG be deprived of the right to revenue from advertising. How do you comment on this and are there similar examples in practice that the public service has no right to profit from advertising?

HS: This discussion does indeed come up time and again – and I can honestly understand it. I also find advertising annoying, especially when it comes too often and is too long. But, as far as I can tell, the public broadcasters in all countries are allowed to broadcast advertising. The revenue from advertising is an important part of the overall financing, which cannot simply be compensated for should it be abolished. In Germany, the share of advertising is about 8 percent. In our study, by the way, the acceptance of advertising as co-financing of the public broadcasting was relatively high. In Montenegro, 29 percent of respondents said they accept advertising on RTCG. And there is another point: the more popular a station is, the greater the motivation of the advertising industry to broadcast advertisements there.

MMInstitute: When it comes to the election of members of the RTCG Council, there is always a controversy in our public as to whether all of them are related to certain political parties or are independent in decision-making. Interestingly, in the German Public Service, some members of the Council are also MP's or representatives of political parties. Is that a good model for greater independence of Council members or is it still inapplicable in our societies?

HS: The public broadcasters in Germany are controlled by the so-called broadcasting councils. These are reflections of society and are sometimes made up of more than 40 members. These are delegated by various socially relevant organisations for four or five years - i.e. they are not elected from the political side. They include trade unions and churches but also, for example, representatives of youth organisations, nature conservation and agricultural associations, universities or women's and music associations. Yes, representatives of political parties are also members the broadcasting councils. However, the Federal Constitutional Court decided a few years ago that the proportion of the so-called state-affiliated members may only be 30 percent.



MMInstitute: The war in Ukraine has been the main topic of all world media in recent months. Is it possible for the media, especially for the public broadcaster, to remain neutral in such situations, or is it necessary to have a clear position that this is a Russian invasion and aggression against a sovereign country?

HS: That is a difficult but valid question. The basic principle is that quality journalism must

be independent and impartial. However, the question of whether journalists should also be allowed to take a stance is being discussed more and more frequently. Here, in situations that endanger our democratic, free and pluralistic social order, I am clear: Yes, they may and they even have to. Because without democracy, there can be no free press. Otherwise we would be sawing the branch we are all sitting on. This does not mean, however, that journalists are allowed to look closely, ask questions and criticise even in special situations like the one we are currently experiencing.

MMInstitute: In which of the countries in the region have you registered the most Russian propaganda since the beginning of the war in Ukraine?

HS: The Kremlin has been trying for a long time to divide and destroy our free society by all means with its hybrid war, which Russia has started. Disinformation and fake news are important tools in this perverse strategy of destruction. Here, trust in traditional media, such as public broadcasting, must be strengthened, but also appropriate means to develop media literacy must be found. Russian propaganda can be found in all countries, and it is also very active in Germany. It is especially dangerous when politicians and traditional media adopt this false propaganda. In South East Europe, the Slavic countries, which can be associated linguistically and culturally with Russia, should be mentioned: Serbia, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Montenegro, but also Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

MMInstitute: A law (Gesetz zur Verbesserung der Rechtsdurchsetzung in sozialen Netzwerken, "NetzDG") has been in force in Germany since 2018, ordering social media to quickly remove hate speech, fake news and other illegal content. Has this act significantly contributed to the reduction of hate speech and especially false news?

HS: First of all: it is important to take action against all these phenomena, which did not exist in the past, at least to this extent. Disinformation and fake news are digital plagues of our time. They destroy our society and are often used specifically for this

very reason. The awareness to take action against them in the social networks has grown in recent years. But it is still not enough. The NetzDG was just a start. In Germany, further laws have been enacted the Digital Service Act was recently passed at EU level. Such action by the state is always a tightrope walk, because it can very quickly lead to censorship. This has to be observed. However, the state must react when such phenomena threaten democracy and ultimately society.

MMInstitute: The German state institution in charge of the media (MABB) banned the broadcasting of the television channel "Russia today DE" in Germany due to the lack of a license, even before the war in Ukraine. There are several media outlets in Montenegro that refuse to register in accordance with the law and have been spreading Russian propaganda for a long time. How is it possible to better regulate this area and why is it necessary for all media to be registered, even though the Council of Europe, on the other hand, considers that forced registration is a restriction on freedom of speech?

HS: The ban on Russian channels can also be viewed critically at first. We live in a pluralistic society in which there must be many different voices. But, the



information through which we form our opinions must be true. It must especially be true if political decisions are made through it. Anything else would be fatal. There are also no "alternative facts" and we do not live in a "post-factual age". Russian broadcasters are proven instruments of the well-funded propaganda machine of the Kremlin and its secret services. There is enough evidence for that. In this respect, it was right - especially in view of the current war situation and the threat posed by the aggressor Russia - to ban the stations.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Media Programme Southeast Europe
Bulevard Yanko Sakazov 19
Et. 1, Ap. 2
1504 Sofia
Bulgaria

www.kas.de/medien-europe

media.europe@kas.de



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