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Media Programme South East Europe

Thinking out of the box for more independent and profitable media

At the 12th “South East Europe Media Forum” (SEEMF) in Tirana measures and rules for financially independent media reporting in South East Europe were discussed

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Financial independence from media owners, advertisers, investors as well as the business with false news and transparency of media ownership were the main topics of the 12th South East Europe Media Forum (SEEMF) in Tirana on the 15th and 16th November 2018. The biggest media conference in South East Europe brought about 300 journalists, publishers, politicians and NGO representatives from all over Europe to Albania. The KAS Media Programme South East Europe hosts this media forum every year together with the South East European Media Organisation (SEEMO) and the Central European Initiative (CEI).

In addition to the welcoming remarks by **Oliver Vujović**, SEEMO Secretary General, the conference was opened by **Hendrik Sittig**, Head of the KAS Media Programme South East Europe. Concerning the media situation in the region, he said: “Journalists need to be aware of their role, their task in a democracy as watchdog over the situation in the society.” He further expressed the challenges which the media sector has to face and encouraged the experts in the audience to think outside the box in order to develop competitive concepts for more profitability and transparency on the media market. **Walter Glos**, Head of the KAS country office Albania, took also part in the opening ceremony. He explained that Albania is about to start EU accession negotiations, however the country still faces huge challenges. **Ilir Melo**, CEI coordinator for Albania and the Director for the Region and Neighbouring Countries at the Albanian Foreign Ministry, stressed the importance of the forum, especially for the promotion of pluralistic media and strengthening of quality journalism.

Albanian President Ilir Meta Was a Guest at SEEMF

Traditionally SEEMF is opened by the president or prime minister of the host country. Albanian

President **Ilir Meta** underlined the meaning of an independent press, especially in times when press freedom also declines inside the European Union. “Politics won’t take the freedom of the press,” promised Meta during his speech. Afterwards he answered various questions by national and international media representatives.

Right after that SEEMO Secretary General Oliver Vujović moderated a discussion on the relationship between media and politics in Albania. **Aleksander Cipa**, President of the Union of Albanian Journalists, referred to the fact that many journalists in Albania are working without an employment contract and unfortunately they also wouldn’t work in a collective, to change the situation. **Lutfi Dervishi**, from the Albanian National Television RTSH, explained that there is a lack of critical and investigative journalism, fact-checking as well as solidarity among the journalists. **Jonila Godole**, Director of the Institute for Democracy, Media and Culture in Tirana, described the changes in the Albanian media market in the last 25 years. “Media have surrendered themselves to political interests,” said Godole. **Klodiana Lala**, journalist at News 24 TV, reported that unknown perpetrators had fired at her family home after her investigations. In spite of this attempt at intimidation, where

fortunately nobody was hurt, she is assured to continue her journalistic work. Furthermore, Lala criticised that journalism is being destroyed by self-censorship. **Alfred Lela**, Founder of the online news portal "Politiko.al", illustrated that it is not necessary for Albanian journalists to think out of the box, but it is rather important to go back to the basic rules. **Ilva Tare**, News Director at Euronews Albania, criticised that mainstream media only report about politicians and do not talk anymore with the "normal" citizens.

Journalists from Serbia and Bosnia Receive CEI SEEMO Award

During the conference the annual "CEI-SEEMO Award for Outstanding Merits in Investigative Journalism" was awarded. **Stevan Dojčinović** and **Dragana Pećo** from the Serbian investigative Centre „Crime and Corruption Reporting Network“(KRIK) received the prize for their contribution to the investigative journalism in Serbia and for the impact of their courageous stories on the society in one very challenging environment. **Nino Bilajac** from the Center for Investigative Journalism in Sarajevo (CIN) won the award in the category "Young Journalist" for his report on financial misuse in public procurement and public funds.

Financial Security Not Enough for Independent Reporting

The second day of the conference started with a panel on „Power in our pockets: the business of news – What to do to ensure independent reporting?“ **Lars Radau**, freelance journalist at the German newspaper der Sächsische Zeitung, moderated the discussion. "Many newsportals are financially dependent on international donors," explained **Goran Mihajlovski**, Founder of the Macedonian online news portal "SDK web". This is the consequence of the retraction of many publishing houses like the WAZ media group from the South East European market. His news portal for example was only financed 10 percent by advertisements; the rest came from international donors, he said.

Boro Kantić, Director of the Media Centar Sarajevo, noticed that the competition on the media market is fierce because everybody can

publish news on the internet nowadays. **Nataliya Gumenyuk**, Founder and Head of Hromadske TV from Ukraine, said that it is important for journalists not only to know their craft, but also to understand how to run a company. They have to explain donors and audiences good journalism in order to protect their brand.

Adelheid Feilcke, Head of the Department Europe at Deutsche Welle, explained that for independent reporting the internal structures are important. Thus, it needs a diverse board and a legal department to act when mistakes are made. "Pluralism secures independence. More voices build the truth," said **Francesco de Filippo** from the Italian news agency.

Sabina Castelfranco, Italian correspondent for CBS News, said that future lies in the digital market as the youth is getting the news from there. Moreover, she underlined the importance of control mechanisms. For example, CBS news never publishes an article before at least two sources were quoted and two editors have edited the text.

Subsequently, **Ognian Zlatev**, Head of the Representation of the European Commission in Bulgaria, held a keynote on the importance of an independent media landscape. "Only then progress in the Balkan countries is achievable," he said.

Business with Fake News Dangerous for Quality Journalism

The second panel was about the influence of disinformation on media companies and journalists. The session was moderated by **Christian Mihr**, Executive Director of "Reporters without Borders" in Germany. **Eric Chamberland** from the Think Tank NATO Stratcom CoE in Riga presented various examples on false news. He said that disinformation often was spread in the form of very credible videos. According to him nowadays it is very easy to edit video content in a very trustworthy way. The political analyst and editor of the online portal „@theEUpos“, based in Trieste and Brussels, **Marco Gombacci** reported about his experience in the Syrian war. He explained how disinformation and propaganda was spread through social media and how the citizens immediately believed it. Gombacci

criticised the editorial offices since they often do not give journalists in war zones enough time to analyse the situation and thus mistakes in the reporting would occur. The Russian journalist and human rights activist **Oksana Chelysheva** who is living in exile in Helsinki talked about the practice of journalists writing false news. In her opinion this is happening in parts due to self-censorship among the journalists. Overcoming this issue would be a question of the political will. **Alina Radu**, Director of the Moldovan daily „Ziarul de Gardă“, said during the discussion that rules are needed in order to punish the donors of media which are spreading disinformation .

Zoran Sekulić, founder and CEO of the Serbian News Agency „Fonet“ expressed his concern that journalists who write and spread fake news could not be called journalists.

After the second panel the media expert **Nico Pitrelli** talked about the relationship between media and science. His key message was that the media should spread knowledge in order to strengthen the development of the democratic societies.

Credibility Only Possible With Professional Content

The third panel focused on the question how the influence of advertisers, investors and donors could be minimised. **Stevan Dojčinović**, Editor-in-Chief of the investigative online portal KRIK, said that crowdfunding campaigns are working well for his portal and the readers are willing to support independent media projects. However, there are legal restrictions in Serbia which limit crowdfunding, e.g. the online payment service PayPal is illegal.

Florian Nehm, Head of Corporate Sustainability and EU affairs at Ringier Axel Springer Media, appealed that also advertisers need to take responsibility for which media and content they pay. Furthermore, he said that he supports more media pluralism in South East Europe and welcomes the work of investigative journalists in the region.

Silvio Pedrazzi, CEO of Intesa Sanpaolo Bank Albania and Board Member of the Foreign Investors Association Albania (FIAA) in Tirana, said that as a bank there are three types of

cooperation with media: as advertiser, in direct communication and as loan provider. However, he also remarked that from an ethical point of view it is not advised to give loans to media, due to independence reasons.

Elena Popović, General Counsel at the Media Development Investment Fund in New York, explained her work and reported about the requirements for investments in media projects. One possibility for more transparency she sees in the regulation of the media market. Moreover, Popović gave examples for independent media companies and their business models.

Klaus Schweighofer, Chairman of the Management Board of Styria Media International based in Graz, was convinced that it is possible to earn money with good digital content, and to secure the own existence and independent reporting. “Content which comes from advertisers should not be excluded, however it must be labelled as such,” said Schweighofer. The PR-expert **Samra Lučkin** from Sarajevo moderated the discussion.

Regulation of Media Ownership and Transparency as a Solution Approach

Katerina Sinadinovska, President of the Council of Media Ethics Macedonia, criticised that media ownership is unknown in many South East European countries.

Sandra Bašić-Hrvatini, Researcher at the Peace Institute in Ljubljana, added that non-transparent media ownership structures are a danger for the public opinion building. According to **Željko Ivanović**, CEO of the Montenegrin daily “Vijesti”, political elites in South East Europe do not have an interest in independent media. He told the example of Finland. The media situation is better there because politics supports media and sees journalists as watchdogs of democracy.

Besar Likmeta, Editor-in-Chief of the “Balkan Investigative Reporting Network” (BIRN) in Albania, said about the media situation that a lot of people were trying to address the problem, but only few would be heard by political actors. In his opinion, the legal framework and its implementation need improvement in order to achieve progress. **Ricardo Gutierrez**, Secretary General of the European Journalism Association in Brussels, moderated the panel.

Venue for 13th SEEMF Announced

In the end the organisers Barbara Fabro, Oliver Vujović und Hendrik Sittig thanked all panellists, moderators and guests for their active

participation as well as the translators who have done an excellent job. They announced that the next South East Europe Media Forum will probably take place in Zagreb in autumn 2019.

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