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FREE, BUT NOT INDEPENDENT

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE

Matthias Barner

It was no ordinary letter. When the Prime Minister writes a letter to the chief editors and managing directors of the most influential media outlets in his country, then people sit up and take notice. Bojko Borisov, Bulgaria's head of government since 2009, wanted to know whether the media felt they were being put under any editorial pressure by the government. He received a swift reply which was printed for all to see. With one voice they answered no – we are professionals and we are independent. We have never been put under any pressure by either this government or any previous governments.¹

The uniformity of the answers inevitably raises some doubts about their truthfulness. The fact is, such an event is a typical reflection of the situation of the media in the countries of South East Europe² and highlights their relationship to politics and those in power. This could just as easily have happened in one of the other countries in this region. On the one hand it shows how the media themselves are effectively a part of politics and just how willing they are to be used as a tool in this kind of stunt. But it also serves to highlight the professional self-image that leading media representatives in the new eastern democracies seem to have. Freedom of the press is constitutionally guaranteed and they believe they are bound to act in accordance with professional journalistic standards.

1 | Cf. *Novinite.com (Sofia News Agency)*, "Top Bulgarian Media Side with Prime Minister Borisov", May 31, 2010, http://novinite.com/view_news.php?id=116713 (accessed October 10, 2011).

2 | This article relates to the countries covered by the KAS Media Program South East Europe: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia.

However, the question remains as to whether the media are not only free but do actually work independently, too. Anybody who looks closely at the media in South East Europe must surely entertain some serious doubts.

In recent years we have seen a growing trend away from guaranteeing free and independent reporting in many countries in East and South East Europe. Despite the fact that media markets have become as liberal and pluralistic as possible the work of journalists and the role of the media in South East Europe are becoming increasingly a cause for concern. Poor-quality reporting, inadequate training for journalists, a growing divergence between media law and media reality, coercive measures and administrative restrictions on the part of the state, political and financial dependencies as well as the blurring of lines between the private and state spheres are typical of the situation in the region. Remzi Lani, head of the Albanian Media Institute and a recognised expert when it comes to the situation in the region as a whole, describes today's media landscape in the Balkans as "vivid, chaotic, non-transparent, over-crowded, defragmented and partly free".³

This somewhat negative picture is a cause for concern because even in countries like Romania and Bulgaria there are no signs that the media situation is improving, even though they are now members of the EU. This does not suggest that the European Union's integration process has been particularly effective in this respect and raises the question as to whether the European institutions are doing enough when it comes to press freedom. A comparison of the press freedom rankings compiled by Reporters Without Borders for 2005 and 2010 shows that there is a trend away from press freedom in the countries of South East Europe (see table 1). Currently these countries are ranked between 47 and 104 in the statistics which cover a total of 178 countries worldwide. The Freedom House organisation shows no particular differences between

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3 | Remzi Lani, "Balkan Media: Lost in Transition?", in: UNESCO (ed.), *Professional Journalism and Self-Regulation. New Media, Old Dilemmas in South East Europe and Turkey*, Paris, 2011, 41.

2005 and 2010, but the current statistics classify all the countries in the region as only "partly free".⁴

Table 1
Press Freedom Index⁵

Country	2005	2010
Albania	62	80
Bosnia and Herzegovina	33	47
Bulgaria	48	70
Kosovo	100	92
Croatia	56	62
Macedonia	43	68
Moldova	74	75
Montenegro	65*	104
Romania	70	52
Serbia	65	85

* Serbia and Montenegro

THE MEDIA AS A DEMOCRATIC FACTOR IN THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

There is no doubt that the media in South East Europe also played a decisive role in the process of democratic transformation.

The development of free and independent media is one of the key factors in the transformation process. A fully-functioning democracy requires an independent and diverse media landscape that can fulfil without restriction its dual role of information provider and watchdog in the social and political spheres. Why is it that the media in South East Europe are at the moment clearly unable to adequately fulfil this role? To answer this question we just need to take a look at what has happened since 1989. There is no doubt that the media in South East Europe also played a decisive role in the process of democratic transformation. The upheavals of twenty years ago brought about radical changes in the media. Censorship was done away with and journalists were no longer the

4 | Freedom House, "Freedom of the Press 2011", <http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=251&year=2011> (accessed October 10, 2011).

5 | Reporters Without Borders, „Press Freedom Index 2005“, http://en.rsf.org/spip.php?page=classement&id_rubrique=549 (accessed October, 2011); id., „Press Freedom Index 2010“, http://en.rsf.org/spip.php?page=classement&id_rubrique=1034 (accessed October, 2011).

accomplices of dictatorial regimes. To an extent they also played a key role in the overthrow of communist rule. For instance, on December 22, 1989 citizens in the Romanian capital of Bucharest took over Ceausescu's state-controlled TV broadcaster *TVR* and temporarily renamed it "Free Romanian Television" (*Televiziunea Română Liberă*, TVRL). The situation was even more complicated for the media in the countries of the former Yugoslavia because they not only had to contend with post-communist transformation but also military conflicts and the nationalistic and authoritarian regimes of the 1990s.

An assessment of the role of the media in the latest Balkan conflict throws up some contradictions. Here too, the media was of course a driving force in promoting democracy and helping to overcome ethnic nationalism. Well-known examples of this are *Radio B92* in Belgrade, which played a not insignificant role in the fall of the Milosevic regime, and the newspapers *Oslobodjenje* in Sarajevo, *Koha Ditore* in Pristina and *Feral Tribune* in Zagreb. But there is no escaping the fact that the media were at the same time the instruments of their countries' bellicose and nationalistic political parties. Inflammatory media campaigns were used to prepare the ground for the military campaigns to follow. The publicist Adam Michnik wrote that the "Balkan War first started in the newspapers, radio and television stations".⁶

The media throughout the whole of South East Europe has undergone rapid and dynamic change since these post-communist and post-war upheavals. The Balkans are now something of an Eldorado for fans of TV and the kiosks of Belgrade, Sofia, Tirana or Skopje are full of local newspapers and magazines. Online information portals are also becoming more and more popular, while at the same time the countries' constitutions guarantee freedom of opinion and freedom of the press. Broadcasting legislation put in place during the initial transformation phase has already been replaced in part by new laws that take into account the digitalisation of the media. Freedom of information laws have also been introduced throughout the region which are amongst the most progressive in Europe.⁷

6 | Cf. Lani, n. 3, 45.

7 | Cf. *ibid.*, 46 et seq.

Nevertheless, the adoption of regulations that comply with European standards is one thing, but actually implementing them and legally enforcing them is another.

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This is the problem for the media in South East Europe. There are many laws but there are no rules that say the laws actually have to be obeyed. Political, economic and cultural factors have a huge influence on the extent to which laws are obeyed. Added to this is the fact that over the years structures and organisations have emerged that actually make the development of a democratic, pluralistic media landscape much more difficult.

One of the key mistakes made in the beginning was that during the collapse of communism high party functionaries and members of the state security forces switched over to the private sector during the process of privatisation. This was also the case with the media. Even today there are old boy networks made up of oligarchs, media moguls and their straw men. Their goal is not to inform the public but to manipulate them for their own ends and to support their pursuit of power. The legacy of communism is much more evident in the countries of South East Europe than it is in Central and East European countries because in South East Europe regime changes began a lot later or were not fully implemented. There were no wholesale changes to the elite old guard, the power cartels simply rebranded themselves.⁸ This kind of thing is especially dangerous within the media industry because it compromises the media's role as promoters of democracy and as "the fourth estate".

FOREIGN MEDIA OWNERSHIP – BLESSING OR CURSE?

In the past twenty years the West has invested a lot of money in the media in South East Europe. This has not just been through state funding or large-scale EU or OSCE programmes but also through strategic investments by Western European and American media companies. Many well-known names have discovered that the Balkans is a

8 | Cf. Karl-Peter Schwarz, "Korruption als System", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 6, 2011, <http://faz.net/aktuell/politik/suedosteuropa-korruption-als-system-1596430.html> (accessed October 10, 2011).

profitable place to do business, including Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, U.S. businessman Robert Lauder's Central European Media Enterprises and the RTL Group. From Germany the WAZ Group in particular has become well-known for its extensive involvement in South East Europe. From a Western viewpoint this investment was tied up with the hope of exporting European journalistic standards and so helping to further the process of democratisation. While this seemed possible in theory, it proved to be difficult in practice.

WAZ's involvement in the region is a classic example of this. The company went on a buying spree all over South East Europe. In Macedonia and Bulgaria it ended up owning almost 70 per cent of the print media market.⁹ Its business model was always the same: buy up many of the country's newspapers but let the editorial team remain independent, while centralising printing, marketing, advertising and administration in order to save money. The result was that while management practices were modernised there was no significant improvement in the quality of the journalism. Tabloid-style journalism continued to dominate, there were some dubious individuals amongst the editorial staff and there was no long-term strategy for developing young journalists. In order to succeed using this business model it was necessary to come to certain arrangements with the political elite and some dodgy middlemen were often used.

In Serbia in particular this business model ended in disaster. The Serbian government declared that WAZ was an undesirable institution. The government held a 50 per cent share in the long-established newspaper *Politika* through a state-owned company, while the WAZ Group owned the other 50 per cent. The result was a long-running dispute that had all the ingredients of a classic political and financial thriller.¹⁰ WAZ Group CEO Bodo Hombach pulled the plug last year and announced that "we do not see South

9 | Cf. Marc Stegherr and Kerstin Liesem, *Die Medien in Osteuropa. Mediensysteme im Transformationsprozess*, Wiesbaden, 2010, 19.

10 | Cf. Michael Martens, "Im Reich der Oligarchen", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 9, 2010.

East Europe as a potential future market".¹¹ The close ties between oligarchs and those in political power are likely to poison the market. Although it has not yet completed its withdrawal from Serbia, WAZ has already sold its interests in Romania and Bulgaria. It is holding on to its interests in Croatia and Macedonia but rumours that they are soon to be sold have not gone away.

The WAZ Group's experience in South East Europe is not unique. Although the involvement of Western media companies has resulted in the export of a considerable amount of know-how, the hoped-for improvement in quality has not really materialised. The private media boom and attendant foreign involvement in the transitional countries of South East Europe has not had the desired effect of promoting democracy. Looking back it is clear that foreign support is no replacement for a sustainable and profitable business model.¹²

AL-JAZEERA BALKANS – A SIGN OF CHANGES TO COME IN THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE?

Although there is a trend towards reduced foreign media investment in South East Europe there are still some exceptions. Only last year the German multimedia company Axel Springer Verlag formed a joint venture with the Swiss company Ringier AG to invest in Slovakia, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary as well as in Serbia. The high-circulation Serbian daily newspaper *Blic* belongs to this Swiss-German joint venture. But what has attracted the most attention so far is the fact that *Al-Jazeera Balkans* intends to start a full broadcasting programme at the end of 2011 in the three regional languages of Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian. The Qatari broadcaster will invest around ten million Euros in

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11 | Cf. "WAZ-Gruppe zum Ausstieg aus Südosteuropa bereit", *Handelsblatt*, August 2, 2010, <http://handelsblatt.com/unternehmen/it-medien/waz-zum-ausstieg-aus-suedosteuropa-bereit/3504516.html> (accessed October 10, 2011).

12 | Dusan Reljic, "Mass Media, Post Conflict Transformation and Transition: Why is it Bodo and not Katharine?", European Commission Speak up Conference, May 6, 2011, 18, http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/speakup-conference/documents/index_en.htm (accessed October 10, 2011).

the Balkans in the first year alone. 70 to 80 million euros of direct investment are also planned for subsequent years.¹³ The broadcaster has already moved into its glass head office in Sarajevo, many well-known journalists have been recruited and pilot programmes are running at full steam. This launch sparked debate amongst media experts before it even started. Is this a sign of changes to come in the media landscape of the Balkans? Will *Al-Jazeera* – which even before the Arab Spring was making a name for itself thanks to its high-quality reporting – actually be able to deliver the long hoped-for improvements in quality? There are also voices which fear that the network's expansion westwards is predominantly motivated by geopolitical interests and that it tries to strengthen Islam in this part of the world. Bosnia and Herzegovina is seen in many Muslim countries as a gate to influence the Balkans and thus Europe.

The fact is that *Al-Jazeera* wants to be a key player in the regional media market. Edhem Foco, a Bosnian businessman and Islamic activist who acts as an agent for *Al-Jazeera*, comments: "We all speak basically the same language. There are many common points of reference and you need to position yourself in such a way that you can reach as many viewers as possible."¹⁴

The region is crying out for "an impartial TV broadcaster that is independent of national politics or state funding".¹⁵ Another reason that *Al-Jazeera's* entry into the Balkan market merits some attention is the fact that, while it is moving in, other media companies like the *BBC* and *Deutsche Welle* are pulling out of the region in ever-greater numbers. Together with *Al-Jazeera Turkey*, *Al-Jazeera Balkans* will be one of the first two regional subsidiaries not to broadcast in Arabic or English. Experts estimate that there are potentially 20 million viewers in the Balkan region alone. On top of that there are the citizens of the former Yugoslavia who now live in Western Europe and who will be able to receive the programmes via satellite or

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13 | Cf. "Al Jazeera erobert den Balkan", *Deutsche Welle*, March 4, 2011, <http://dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,14885001,00.html> (accessed October 10, 2011).

14 | Ibid.

15 | Ibid.

cable.¹⁶ However, it is still too early to judge what impact *Al-Jazeera Balkans* will have on the media landscape of South East Europe. Even if the broadcaster succeeds in putting out good quality, politically balanced programmes in the future it is highly questionable whether this will have a significant influence on the rampant tabloidisation and deterioration of the content on offer from the media in the region generally.

QUANTITY NOT QUALITY

“Balkan Media losing the Battle with Tabloidisation?” This question was used as the opener to a background report by the *BalkanInsight* news portal that looks into the reasons behind the dumbing down of the media in the Balkans.¹⁷ It is a cause for real concern when, at a time of economic crisis, some of the few remaining quality newspapers in South East Europe have to fight for survival while the tabloid papers seem to be going from strength to strength. When on the very same day this summer two new tabloids were launched in Bulgaria, *Vseki den* (Every Day) and *Bulgaria dnes* (Bulgaria Today), you had to ask whether Bulgarian readers really needed two more scandal rags. The kiosks were already full of the yellow press. Yet the timing was perfect, because in the summer the rich and beautiful hit the Black Sea coastal resorts and the paparazzi are kept fully occupied. It only took a few weeks for *Vseki den* and *Bulgaria dnes* to become the second and third most popular papers according to national circulation statistics.

“We’ve reached the point where the media, controlled by politicians and tycoons and eroded by the economic crisis, seeks neither quality nor to investigate” is how the Serbian TV journalist Bojan Bosiljcic described the current trend.¹⁸ But it doesn’t help that representatives from the media

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16 | Cf. “Al Jazeera expands to Europe”, *NewzGlobe.com*, March 28, 2011, <http://newzGlobe.com/article/20110329/al-jazeera-expands-europe> (accessed October 10, 2011).

17 | Cf. “In Depth: Balkan Media losing the Battle with Tabloidisation?”, *BalkanInsight*, May 28, 2010, <http://balkaninsight.com/en/article/in-depth-balkan-media-losing-the-battle-with-tabloidisation> (accessed October 10, 2011).

18 | Ibid.

are always looking to lay the blame on politicians and the business world, when in fact it is the journalists themselves, with their poor professionalism, their inability to maintain consistent ethical standards and even their susceptibility to corruption, that presents the main problem. There are “enemies in our midst”,¹⁹ writes Gordana Igric, Regional Director of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN).

One of the problems is the way the media report the political process. The media in South East Europe often simply repeat what the politicians say. There is little in the way

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of analysis and not enough real scrutiny. It is a form of press release journalism with a lot of what is said simply being reproduced for consumption. By doing this the media is helping to create a very superficial information culture. This not only shapes the information behaviour of the population at large but also compromises the professional identity of the journalists. One of the main causes of this weakness in the system is the fact that South East Europe has so far failed to set up any clear structures for training journalists and giving them the experience they need. The vast majority of young journalists simply join the profession without any proper training – and without training they are generally more easily manipulated. Hordes of young journalists pack press conferences in the capital cities of South East Europe. A lot of media owners like to hire young, inexperienced journalists who they think will be nicely compliant. Many of them are afraid to lose their jobs and so there tends to be widespread self-censorship amongst journalists, either because of harassment or because they lack a sense of professional identity.

One of the direct consequences of this is the fact that journalists and the media in general are held in low-esteem by the man in the street. The well-respected International Research and Exchange Board (IREX) suggests in its *Media Sustainability Index 2010* that the

19 | Gordana Igric, “Media Freedom and its Enemies in the Balkans”, *BalkanInsight*, May 6, 2011, <http://balkaninsight.com/en/article/media-freedom-and-its-enemies-in-the-balkans> (accessed October 10, 2011).

public in this region generally display apathy towards the media.²⁰ The media are considered by many to be simply an extension of the political classes – and trust in politics in the Balkans is at a very low ebb indeed. The sense of disenchantment and often downright contempt that many people feel for politics is now starting to spread to the media. People don't see the media as trustworthy and independent but tend to believe they are basically controlled by politicians and oligarchs. As a result many good journalists are constantly changing jobs or just try to make their own niche. Many journalists have private blogs which they publish alongside their official work.

This retreat into niche areas actually makes it harder to establish any form of consistent and effective self-regulation of the media. There is in fact a large number of journalist associations and self-regulation bodies in South East European countries but the associations often tend to compete with each other or embroil themselves in internal squabbles, as is currently the case in Macedonia and Serbia. In Romania they have around ten different sets of codes of ethics for journalists, yet not one of them is accepted by all journalists or the leading media outlets.²¹ Another problem is that the associations are often run by former communists. However, some self-regulation bodies have been formed that are based to an extent on the model of the German Press Council. For example, the Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina has taken on an important pioneering role in the region as a whole. However not all countries in the region have set up similar press councils or, if they have, they are not considered particularly relevant.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PRESSURE

Although press freedom is constitutionally guaranteed in South East Europe and the region has a huge range of media outlets we should not allow this to blind us to the fact that editors are placed under constant pressure. In its

20 | Cf. *Media Sustainability Index 2010*, ix, http://irex.org/system/files/MSI_2010_EE_Full.pdf (accessed October 10, 2011).

21 | Cf. Peter Bajomi-Lazar, "Romania. A Country Report for the ERC-funded project on Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe", 14, <http://mde.politics.ox.ac.uk/index.php/publications> (accessed October 10, 2011).

Enlargement Strategy report published in 2010 the European Commission complained with regard to the western Balkans that: "Editorial independence is undermined by undue political and economic pressures."²² While in earlier times under the communist system censorship of the media was practiced by the state, these days various groups apply pressure to journalists in different ways. "Although we have moved beyond the phase of repression it can be said without too much hesitation that we are going through a phase of pressure", says Remzi Lani.²³

On the one side pressure is applied by politicians, either in the form of threats or insults. Political leaders in the Balkans are generally pretty thin-skinned when it comes to critical media reports. They have various measures available to them, including suing for libel or slander in the courts, which are also not always particularly independent. More subtle, but often more effective, are the financial ways that the state can exert influence on the media. These range from "paid for" news articles through to controlling the advertising business and using it to reward favourable media and punish those that criticise. Government advertising is an important source of revenue, especially at times of economic crisis. Many regional newspapers are highly dependent on regular patronage by the state. It goes without saying that this can lead to interference in the editorial process. The state often has an influence on the private advertising sector as well. In Serbia, for example, a handful of advertising agencies close to the ruling parties control almost all the advertising money.²⁴ Advertising is in the hands of relatively few people in other countries in the region too and they have a significant influence on the livelihoods of publishers and media houses. Added to that there is the administrative pressure that can be applied by the state. In Macedonia the government accused the country's largest private TV broadcaster *TV 1* of tax evasion, which contributed to the company's closure. The question needs to be asked why

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22 | Expansion Strategy 2010-2011, 10, http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/press_corner/key-documents/reports_nov_2010_de.htm (accessed October 10, 2011).

23 | Cf. Lani, n. 3, 47.

24 | Cf. Igric, n. 19.

it was that the tax investigators only looked carefully into the affairs of the particular TV station that happened to be outspoken in its criticism of the government.

On the other side businessmen with links to organised crime are also increasingly exerting their influence on the media.

This kind of pressure from oligarchs can be even more dangerous as they often not only control the financial and personal resources of the media houses, but are also capable of using threats and intimidation when necessary. It helps that everything goes on behind closed doors.

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The lack of transparency when it comes to ownership and funding in particular is perhaps the biggest problem in the media landscape of South East Europe. It is often not clear who is behind which medium or media group. Nominal owners are mostly just front men, while the real owners hide behind off-shore companies abroad. As long as this lack of transparency in media ownership continues to exist then it will not be possible to effectively stop the trend towards media concentration. Behind the apparent plurality of media ownership lies the fact that there are only a few dominant players who are in a position to influence both the market and public opinion.

This trend towards concentration of ownership has grown significantly in the region in recent years. In those places where foreign owners have left the market locals from the world of politics and business have stepped in. One of the most controversial groups involved is the New Bulgarian Media Group owned by media mogul Irena Krasteva. This former head of the Bulgarian state lottery Toto2 became well-known for very quickly buying up a whole series of local newspapers and TV stations, including the cheap daily newspaper *Telegraph*, apparently the most-read daily in Bulgaria. Rumours regularly circulate in Bulgaria about possible links between the media group and a bank which holds a considerable amount of capital from state-owned businesses and which is apparently the source of 70 per cent of the Krasteva group's advertising income. Another rumour is that Deljan Peevski, Krasteva's son and a Member of Parliament for the DPS, a party addressing the Turkish minority, is the one who really pulls the strings

in the media empire.²⁵ Similar alliances between politics, media and the business world are typical of the media landscape in the region. Direct interference by oligarchs, who not only represent their own business interests but are also closely linked to political parties, is fairly standard.

There is also a tendency towards the repoliticisation of the media, which was something nobody really expected to see in the former communist countries. One

of the main reasons is the extreme political polarisation that we are seeing in many countries of South East Europe, especially in Albania, Macedonia, Croatia and Romania in recent times. This polarisation has spread

The extreme political polarisation has spread to the media. During the presidential election in Romania in 2009 few private TV channels threw their weight behind the social democratic presidential candidate.

to the media and clearly goes beyond those official public broadcasters who are mostly dependent of state funding and so have effectively remained state-owned institutions.²⁶ During the last presidential election in Romania at the end of 2009 a number of private TV channels really threw their weight behind the social democratic presidential candidate Mircea Geoana. Behind this campaign was one of Romania's richest men, Sorin Ovidiu Vântu, owner of the media company *Realitatea Media* at that time.²⁷ In Bosnia and Herzegovina the political and media landscape is very much split along ethnic lines. An analysis of media reporting during the parliamentary and presidential elections of October 2010, carried out on behalf of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, concluded that the media were firmly on the side of one politician or party, almost without exception.²⁸ Fahrudin Radončić in particular caused something of a stir because he was the owner of the highest circulation newspaper in the country *Dnevni Avaz* and yet was also standing in the elections with his own party.

25 | Cf. *Novinite.com*, "Bulgaria's Watchdog Slaps Dumping Fine on Murky Media Tycoon", June 29, 2010, http://novinite.com/view_news.php?id=117614 (accessed October 10, 2011).

26 | Cf. Marius Dragomir, "Am Scheideweg – Inhaberverhältnisse bei Rundfunk und Fernsehen in Osteuropa", *Osteuropa Recht*, Special Edition issued at the conference 8th Frankfurter Medienrechtstage 2009, 48-52.

27 | Cf. IREX, n. 20, 95.

28 | Cf. Media Plan Institute, "2010 Elections in BiH: How the Media Covered the Election Campaign", Sarajevo, 2010, <http://kas.de/medien-europa/en/publications/21626> (accessed October 10, 2011).

This interlinking of media and politics can also be seen in other countries such as Macedonia, where politicians own their own TV stations. In neighbouring Albania both political camps have been sworn enemies for a long time now and exert massive pressure on the country's media. During the 2009 elections party headquarters would produce so-called "ready-made news", which the media would often broadcast or print verbatim.

CONCLUSION: CREDIBILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Twenty years on from the fall of the Iron Curtain and after twenty years of democratisation and transformation, the media landscape in South East Europe now finds itself at a crossroads and in an ongoing process of change which is affected by global, regional, political and cultural factors. Global factors include the pressure on traditional media outlets caused by the growing trend towards media convergence as well as the current impact of the economic and financial crisis on publishers and media houses.

It will be an uphill battle to create democratic and pluralistic media structures against a background of fragile democratic culture, of a lack of any real sense of responsibility and of a generally weak civil society.

However, one key factor in the development of the media in South East Europe will be how quickly they can get away from the kind of patronage-based and non-transparent structures that are standing in the way of a democratic, pluralistic media landscape along European lines. It would be wrong, of course, to just make knee-jerk criticisms of the media in South East Europe. Interestingly, the media in the Balkans does tend to see itself in a kind of negative light. It will be an uphill battle to create democratic and pluralistic media structures against a background of fragile democratic culture, of a lack of any real sense of responsibility and of a generally weak civil society. But maybe these ups and downs are just a normal part of the process of evolution.

However, it is vital that the media finds a way of freeing itself from the influence of politics and oligarchs if it is to fulfil its role as "watchdog" and information provider for the public at large. To do this it will need a competitive business model so that its independence in the future can be guaranteed. Journalistic credibility and integrity will also be essential for success. It is precisely because journalists

in South East Europe currently work under very difficult circumstances that in future they will have to take their fate very much into their own hands, be more critical of their own weaknesses and not always be so ready to point the finger at others. It is time for the media in South East Europe to take collective responsibility instead descending into division and in-fighting. This is the only way that the media will be able to gain credibility and trust in the medium-to-long-term.