



SUMMARY AND CONTEXT

The second edition of the EU - Western Balkans Media Days **took place in the wake of a series of positive developments** in the region that were triggered by the Western Balkans Strategy adopted by the European Commission in February. The Western Balkans Summit in Sofia, the historic Prespa Agreement and the ratification of a border demarcation agreement between Kosovo and Montenegro are, among others, recent signs of a new momentum in the region.

However, the second series of Media Days also took place against the backdrop of **serious setbacks in the area of media freedom**. Eleven cases of physical attacks on journalists in the Western Balkans were reported this year alone, and weak efforts to investigate these attacks has fuelled a sense of impunity. As stressed in the country reports, although legislative frameworks guaranteeing freedom of expression are now largely in place, their implementation remains poor.

The keynote speech by Harlem Désir, OSCE representative on freedom of the media, and a first panel devoted to **media freedom as a key element of the EU accession process** reiterated the importance of media freedom as a fundamental EU principle. Commissioner Hahn, in his introductory remarks, stressed that any country that neglects fundamental rights cannot be a frontrunner in accession talks. To this end, the plenary discussions were also an opportunity to once again call upon governments and authorities to support reforms and make concrete improvements, including strengthening the rule of law, fighting corruption and ensuring a proper functioning of the judiciary, without which media freedom cannot exist.

The EU - Western Balkans Media Days also served as a professional forum for participants to identify challenges and discuss ways of adapting to the radical changes that the media sector is experiencing. Participants **split into three workshops** addressing different topics:

- 1) professionalization through education and training, with a strong focus on media and digital literacy;
- 2) improving the financial sustainability of independent media; and
- 3) the role of public broadcasters, including potential for their regional co-operation.

The **rapporteurs were encouraged to draft concrete recommendations** and proposals that could serve as reference points for efforts to adapt and adjust assistance to media-related issues, both within the European enlargement policy but also for other donors willing to support freedom of expression and media freedom in the Western Balkans.

WORKSHOP 1: Professionalization through education and training

Moderator: Rita Ruduša, Journalist and media executive

Rapporteur: Milica Stojanović, Investigative journalist, *Centre for Investigative Journalism of Serbia (CINS)*

Speakers:

Serbeze Haxhijaj, News editor and Investigative journalist, *Radio Television of Kosovo and BIRN*

Ana Petruševa, Journalist and editor, *BIRN*

Hana Sokolović, News reporter, *TV N1 / CNN*

Pavle Zlatić, Digital media expert, *IREX Serbia / USAID SMS Project*

Summary of discussions

The main task of journalists has remained unchanged since the emergence of the fourth estate: to help the public make informed decisions and to hold authorities accountable. However, the **skills required for accomplishing this task have changed dramatically** - particularly considering today's colossal amount of content (both genuine and false) as well as the diversity of formats in which news and entertainment are presented.

Overall, the workshop's participants agreed that challenges to strengthening the education of journalists and the introduction of new training methods must be **addressed within the broader context** of the need to consolidate democratic institutions in the Western Balkans. Attempts to improve the education of journalists must therefore be accompanied by efforts to impose the rule of law, eliminate political and economic pressures on media, increase the transparency of the media sector and promote media literacy.

The workshop **focused on the gaps** between existing education and training possibilities and the skills required of journalists working in modern media environments. Discussions resulted in a number of concrete proposals, some of which clearly require significant levels of attention and support from donors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Academic curricula** should include sufficient time and space for practical work thereby testing the skills graduates have acquired in order to help them successfully enter the job market.
- To this end, there is a pressing need to **develop regular collaboration between faculties and quality newsrooms**, both nationally and with those in the EU.
- Ways must also be found to encourage the **on-site production of media content**, e.g. by setting up experimental newsrooms within faculties that would give students the opportunity to learn how to create media content free of political and/or economic influence.
- **Future journalists must be properly introduced to critical thinking**. Sufficient time should be devoted to learning sophisticated and concrete procedures for checking facts and identifying forms of manipulation, hidden advertising and propaganda.
- **Stronger ties between academic education and vocational media education** are vitally important. By definition, academic education cannot cover the whole diverse range of specialised journalism skills, and the education of graduates must therefore include vocational training at concrete media outlets selected by the trainees themselves. This should be a part of curricula.
- **Quality must be prioritized over quantity**: a regular assessment of journalism schools and training



courses should be put in place in order to evaluate their significance for the profession (e.g. number of their graduates really working in the media sector, the importance of their contributions to the core activities of their media organisations, etc.). The results of such an assessment would guide potential partners from Europe and beyond as well as young people looking for quality education.

- **Out-of-university journalism training courses** (often sponsored by international and bilateral donors) should reflect real needs and actual situations rather than simply teach general subjects to the widest possible audience. Specialised training in media literacy, financial literacy, storytelling, security, digital journalism, digital content creation, marketing, media entrepreneurship and content production and distribution (to name but a few) should meet the needs of concrete media organisations.
- **Training must be provided differently.** Journalists today are under greater pressure to be efficient and to deliver more; it is therefore important to link training opportunities to their everyday work and to focus on extended mentorships by experienced media professionals rather than simply rely upon one-off seminars. Although such extended mentorships would be more expensive and time-consuming, they would be much more capable of bringing about tangible and durable levels of change, and would create and expand a network of high-quality media training.

WORKSHOP 2: Ensuring the sustainability of independent journalism businesses through smart media investments

Moderator: David Quin, Managing Director, Thomson Foundation

Rapporteur: Saška Cvetkovska, Investigative reporter and media freedom activist, Investigative Reporting Lab

Speakers:

Mihailo Jovović, Editor-in-chief, *Vijesti*

Erl Murati, Journalist and editor-in-chief, *Gazeta Shqiptare*

Klaus Schweighofer, Chairman, *Styria Media Group*

Richard Porter, Director of Communications, *European Bank for Reconstruction and Development*

Jerzy Pomianowski, Executive Director, *European Endowment for Democracy*

Patrice Schneider, Journalist and media executive, *Media Development Investment Fund*

Jelena Vasić, Co-founder, project manager and investigative reporter, *Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK)*

Summary of discussions

Although the workshop's participants agreed that media are much more than regular businesses, they noted that their finances and economic foundations remain easily influenced by overall economic trends (both positive and negative) or the capricious consumer behaviour. A critical assessment of the media economy in the Western Balkans formed a substantial part of the debate.

Firstly, the discussions underlined the fact that independent media organisations around the world are currently facing a dual challenge: 1) they are **exposed to a global competition** imposed by powerful online intermediaries such as Google, YouTube, etc. that monopolise advertising revenue; 2) international competitors bring information and entertainment to consumers in **very advanced formats** which require investments beyond of the capacity of nationally rooted and financially weakened independent media. The digital 'switchover' of independent media can therefore not be accomplished purely by relying on modern 'market wisdom' (which is everything but professional journalism friendly).

Additionally, the media sector in the Western Balkans is marked by a high degree of **informality as opposed to the rule of law** and transparency. This translates into opaque media ownership and obscure sources of financing, as well as into politically corrupt advertising markets and the unaccounted use of public funds in media. In turn, these distort competition and undermine the ability of professional independent journalism to survive, which ultimately results in the communication space being increasingly dominated by polarised and politically biased media organisations and media products of dubious origin (e.g. fake news, 'tabloid' content, etc.). Online and offline media outlets easily serve partisan political or economic interests, leaving no space for content of public interest. Investigative journalism, which is meant to serve as a 'watchdog', suffers the most, and the ability of citizens to access accurate information and pluralistic opinions shrinks ever more.

Whereas enforcing the rule of law in the media sector is a priority of ever-growing importance for the EU accession process of the Western Balkans, it is also a difficult and time-consuming task. **Professional journalism is a public good** that is currently becoming increasingly rare in the Western Balkans, and prompt action is needed. To this end, donors, investors and in particular the EU should go beyond their traditional comfort zones and consider fresh approaches when planning measures to support independent and economically sustainable media in the region.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Move towards **more direct forms of support for independent newsrooms**. Supporting professional media organisations that are committed to independent reporting requires funding their production of quality content. Such funding would also help ensure a continuity of professional media in the Western Balkans, because it is only in independent newsrooms that young journalists (*the future media leaders*) can profit from professional tutoring and experience while producing professional content.
- Independent media must be accompanied in their efforts to **meet the digital challenge**. This is an urgent priority for media assistance at a time when media consumers are moving *en masse* to a digital environment in which global competition is high.
- **Media projects driven by technology deserve support**: market forecasts suggest that investing in advanced (and expensive) software makes media faster and more accurate and efficient, and that it also enables them to search for profitable business models. Independent media managers in the Western Balkans need help to switch independent newsrooms to modern technology.
- **Experienced IT staff must be attracted** and retained. In order to be competitive, a modern newsroom requires experts in IT tools that are crucial for interacting with audiences, and fact checking and investigations also require digital expertise—yet old and new media organisations cannot compete with more profitable sectors when it comes to hiring or retaining IT experts. This competitive disadvantage requires the attention of donors.
- There is a **need to invest in independent media outlets** in order to develop business models that do not rely upon distorted national advertising markets or upon government or private (e.g. oligarch) subsidies. Priority should be given to approaches that help to create direct links with media consumers (e.g. subscription, crowd-funding, classified advertising, etc.).
- A combination of the two: **some core financial support** (e.g. subsidies) **and some investment in modernisation** could effectively provide immediate assistance to independent media organisations. Core support for the day-to-day work of media outlets (at least during a transition or modernisation phase) would be crucial for the continuity of quality content production (including investigative journalism) and therefore for retaining or expanding audiences.
- **Reputable independent ('legacy') media outlets** with established audiences must be protected, as they are vital to sustaining democratic public debates in their countries. Global competition and hostile national market environments are leading legacy media outlets to the brink of collapse, and the next 3-5 years are expected to be decisive. (And an additional note for media donors: it is easier to keep established media alive, albeit in difficulty, than to create new ones from scratch!)
- **Independent pluralism in public debate on new platforms must be promoted**. With mainstream media in decline, it is crucial to encourage new independent initiatives, especially in the realm of social media. Seed-funding, small loans and the related risk guarantees are a few financial assistance tools that donors should make available to new media actors, especially start-ups.
- **Donor programmes** in support of efforts to modernise media business operations **should be 'beneficiary-friendly'**: editors and journalists cannot be compared to regular bank customers, and there is a need for new ways to be found to make funding more accessible to media outlets. This also applies to already available EU instruments supporting a general SME's development in the Western Balkans.



- In conclusion, given the dynamic changes the media sector is undergoing, there can be no universal off-the-shelf solutions capable of ensuring the sustainability of professional journalism. This challenge calls for more and continued efforts, as well as for more specialised **discussions involving investors, advertisers and media professionals.**



WORKSHOP 3: Regional co-operation between independent media and public broadcasters in the Western Balkans

Moderator: Golli Marboe, Chairman, *Association for a Self-determined Use of Media*

Rapporteur: Krenar Gashi, Political scientist, *Sbunker*

Speakers:

Goran Đurović, Media expert, *Media Centar*

Erl Murati, Journalist and editor-in-chief, *Gazeta Shqiptare*

Željka Lekić-Subašić, Head, *ERNO (Eurovision Regional News Exchange) co-ordination office in Sarajevo*

Erjona Rusi, Journalist, *Report TV*

Arta Tahiri, Journalist and TV host, *Alsat M TV*

Summary of discussions

The discussions confirmed that Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs) can **serve as assets for efforts to solidify democracy** in the Western Balkans. Truly public media are not only important for the development of society but also for a stronger overall media landscape, including independent commercial media.

However, as far as the general public is concerned, **PSBs continue to be run in the Western Balkans as state-owned institutions rather than truly public media**. This is primarily due to persistent political interference and control, including via financial dependence and the politically motivated appointment or dismissal of staff. The ongoing temptation to use PSBs in pursuit of narrow political goals and the unwillingness to invest additional funds in order to afford PSBs greater financial autonomy are the main reasons for which efforts to reform Public Service Media continue to stagnate. The lack of funding also limits creative regional co-operation between PSBs and between independent media organisations.

Currently, co-operation between PSBs in the region is mostly confined to exchanging largely political news stories (e.g. breaking news). However, the workshop's participants felt sure that **everyone would profit from working together** on a more comprehensive scale once the conditions for such co-operation are in place.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The EU should provide **advice on locally adapted and effective PSB legislation**. Laws governing the work of Public Service Media can only be properly implemented if they were drafted according to their specific national context. Current efforts (including assistance and advice) to support the transposition of the EU's Audio Visual Services Directive into national legislations in the Western Balkans set a good example. In pursuit of this goal, 'shortcuts' such as imported top-down solutions should be avoided.
- The EU's position should be unequivocal when it comes to **political interference with media**. Such interference is as malicious as (and sometimes more than) political meddling with election processes or market regulation. The EU should firmly and publicly condemn any attempts by authorities to undermine the independence of PSBs (e.g. the recent case of RTCG in Montenegro).
- A **network of regional (and international) PSB correspondents** should be (re-)established. Foreign correspondents were among the first victims of the cost-cutting measures that media organizations

were forced to introduce in response to the recent financial and economic crises; PSBs and other media outlets now obtain their regional and foreign news from agencies. Some of these agencies (e.g. Sputnik, Tanjug, Anadolu) promote agendas and disseminate narratives of doubtful impartiality, and enjoy a quasi-monopoly position. An EU assistance programme to help PSBs to rebuild and maintain a network of regional correspondents in the Western Balkans would greatly strengthen efforts to build or improve regional co-operation, mutual understanding and reconciliation. As a public investment, such a programme would also enable independent commercial media to profit as well.

- **A 'Western Balkans Arte': food for thought.** As an expression of Franco-German co-operation, the Arte channel could serve as a powerful source of inspiration for future EU projects in the Western Balkans. In this regard, it is important to note that PSBs in the Western Balkans will only be able to retain or expand their audiences by producing high-quality news and non-news content, and that joint productions with Public Service Media content should also allow for the participation of other independent media outlets.
- **Collaborative productions: a basis for creativity and innovation.** If carried out according to the best European experiences and expertise, collaborative creative projects are undeniably of great pedagogical value, and could serve as an important means of modernising public service broadcasting in the Western Balkans.