South East Europe Media Conference Special Report

3rd Annual South East Europe Media Conference

The purpose of this report is to share perspectives and feedback from participants at the Third South East Europe Media Conference (SEEMC), run by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation of Europe (OSCE) Representative on Freedom of the Media. Interviews were conducted with participants from all participating states throughout the South East Europe region. The interviews revealed that five major issues still exist as challenges to media freedom in the region: Financial Challenges; Business and Political Interests; Implementation of Existing Laws; Digitalization; and Public Service Broadcasting.

The results of this research reveal that the conference should continue annually as it highlights issues that are otherwise not discussed throughout the year, but there should be a greater focus on diversifying participation by including more young journalists, especially bloggers that only operate online, activists and legislators who ultimately decide on the laws that are debated at the conference. A list of interviewees and interview questions can be found in the Annex.
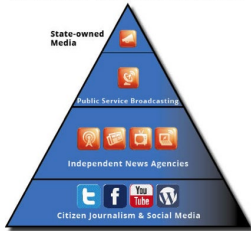
Background - Page 2

The first SEEMC took place in 2011 in Sarajevo and focused on strengthening independent media and reforming media legislation across the region. In 2012 the conference took place in Belgrade and was entitled 'Shaping Policy for the Future.' At the third conference in Tirana, the interactive masterclass was about digitalization of broadcast media and the conference declaration called for Internet freedom and self-regulation mechanisms, among others.

Financial Challenges

As methods evolve for obtaining information and many people access news for free on a daily basis, the old model of selling news through advertisements and subscription revenue is fading out. Every interviewee except one highlighted the financial struggles facing independent media in their countries.

HEALTHY MEDIA BALANCE

State-owned Media

Public Service Broadcasting

Independent News Agencies

Citizen Journalism & Social Media

Business and Political Interests

A repetitive problem according to media freedom groups in South East Europe is corruption. Respondents also noted the lack of transparency in media ownership throughout the region, which contributes to a lack of trust among the public.

Implementation of Existing Laws

Across the region participants expressed the need for better implementation of existing legislation pertaining to access to information, defamation, regulatory bodies and other laws involving journalists and the media. Encouraging implementation of good legislation is an activity of OSCE, and one participant said it is effective because governments only respond to OSCE's reinforcement.

Digitalization

The third SEEMC focused on digitalization as a major topic because of the on-going progress of most countries in the region to transition from analog to digital television. A masterclass on the benefits, challenges and necessary steps for digital switchover took place during the conference, resulting in five concrete recommendations by the participants for authorities in the region.

Public Service Broadcasting: Time for a New Model?

The international community's involvement in South East Europe's media development in the late 1990s focused heavily on public service broadcasting (PSB) with the goal of creating sustainable, high-quality programming akin to the BBC. However, several respondents reacted with visible frustration when asked about the strength of PSB in their countries.

Conference Feedback

When asked their thoughts about the impact and direction of the SEEMC, respondents gave recommendations for what and who they would like to see at future conferences.

Background:
South East Europe Media Conference

Tirana, Albania, where research for this report took place

2011: First SEEMC
'On the Road to Media Freedom,' Sarajevo

Conference Declaration[1]:
- Strengthen the independence of media
- Reform media legislation
- Strengthen public service media
- Curb violence against and intimidation of journalists
- Reform defamation law
- Promote voluntary and independent media self-regulation and ethical journalism
- Ensure transparency of media ownership
- Strengthen journalists' unions and improve employment conditions of journalists

2012: Second SEEMC
'Shaping Policy for the Future,' Belgrade

Conference Declaration[2]:
- Call on governments to adopt and implement transparency of media ownership legislation
- Call on media owners to respect the editorial independence of journalists
- Invite journalists and publishers to negotiate and conclude agreements and by-laws on editorial independence
- Reaffirm the importance of the right to access information
- Urge governments to support and speed up the digitalization process of public service broadcasters

2013: Third SEEMC, Tirana

Conference Declaration[3]:
- Broadcast regulators must be free from political interference
- Self-regulatory mechanisms, offline and online, should be developed by journalists themselves
- The digitalization of the broadcasting spectrum needs to stimulate media pluralism
- The Internet has to remain an open and public forum for freedom of speech and expression
- Freedom of the media applies to all forms of journalism, be it professional, open or "citizen" journalism alike.
- Spending on advertising by public entities must be regulated

Financial Challenges

'We have shifted from repression to pressure. This means no prison, no attacks, no open harassment. But pressure is economical and financial, which is not visible.' – *Remzi Lani*

'In the last 4 years it's been very hard for journalists. Many of them are in precarious working conditions, some media have shut down because of financial problems. **Advertising has diminished about 15%** every year so especially in the print industry, it's a crisis.' – *Zdenko Duka*

'There is still impoverishment, lack of resources, lack of investment.' – *Mark Thompson*

Traditional media outlets around the world (newspapers, radio, television) started to ski down a financial slope even before the global recession in 2008. As methods evolve for obtaining information and many people access news for free on a daily basis, the old model of selling news through advertisements and subscription revenue is fading out. Every interviewee except one highlighted the financial struggles facing independent media in their countries. Journalists' salaries are too low and production expenses too high. Boro Kontić from Sarajevo said a growing trend among young writers is to dabble in journalism for a year or two and then move to a permanent career in public relations. Journalism is no longer considered a viable profession among young people in Southeast Europe, according to most interviewees.

Media outlets are unable or unwilling to finance quality investigative journalism because of conflicting private interests, as many media sources are owned by dominant business or political interests throughout the region. 'We still don't have a tradition of (investigative reporting),' said Remzi Lani of Tirana. 'It needs money and time and we don't have much. You need an open society and I don't think we have an open society. You need courage and I cannot say that everybody has courage.'

As the Internet becomes the first source of public information, pay walls and online advertising are becoming normalised around the world. But in South East Europe there are uncertainties as to whether the existing models would work, especially because the advertising market is small in general and articles may be sold to one syndicate who circulates it for free throughout the web, thus costing the original provider. Both interviewees from Belgrade and Zagreb expressed concern that no Balkan model exists for securing profit for online journalism in the future.

The sad reality, according to Sanja Ivačić Perović from Belgrade, is that 'some independent media are struggling to survive.'
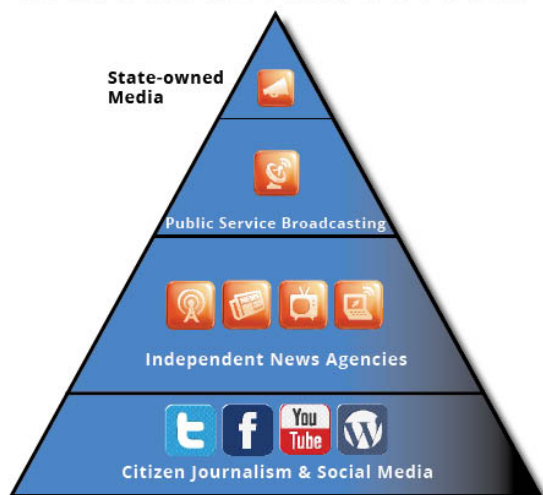
Business and Political Interests

A repetitive theme that runs through media freedom groups in South East Europe is corruption. Media cannot freely report the truth if they are owned by various political and corporate interests. While it is problematic in the region, it should be noted that in most developed democracies around the world, private media is largely owned in blocks by conglomerates, affecting its business practices and claim to independence. However, respondents from the SEEMC interviews believe that content of privately-owned media sources throughout the region is significantly politicized and censored. Alban Zeneli, a journalist from Prishtinë/Priština, said he had received emails from members of the Union of Journalists of Kosovo saying their text was not published by their editors because of personal politics. 'In the every day content of media you can see the impact of corporate interests,' he said.
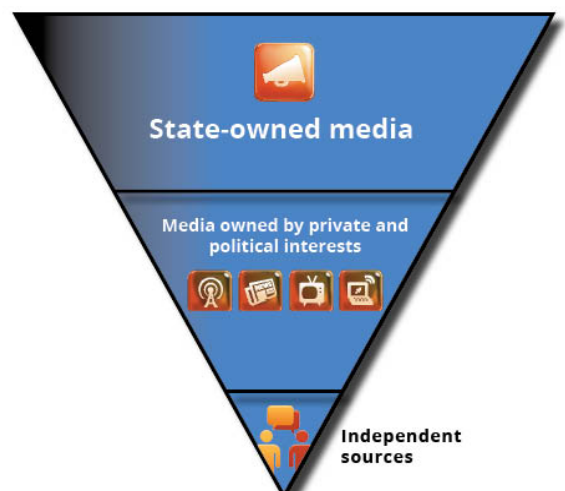
Respondents also noted the lack of transparency in media ownership throughout the region, which contributes to a lack of trust among the public. Zeneli suggested media outlets be required to submit a yearly report of their business practices including ownership to increase the public's trust in private media, thereby increasing transparency and their readership or viewership. Online media is more 'independent' according to Kontić, but Sandra Bašić Hrvatin, an academic from Ljubljana said she still turns to international sources for the most reliable news. Lani said public perception of the media is mixed; some see it as a 'trouble maker' while 'there are polls in Albania where media is the most trusted in fighting against corruption.'

Hrvatin wrote about the problem of media privatization from an academic viewpoint and was sued for defamation. She won the case. The biggest threat to journalist safety, according to Zdenko Duka, a journalist from Zagreb, comes from mafia and criminal threats, not politicians, though the worst period was at the end of the 1990s and the situation has since improved in Croatia.

HEALTHY MEDIA BALANCE

State-owned Media

Public Service Broadcasting

Independent News Agencies

Citizen Journalism & Social Media

UNHEALTHY MEDIA BALANCE

State-owned media

Media owned by private and political interests

Independent sources

Implementation of Existing Laws

Across the region, participants expressed the need for better implementation of existing legislation pertaining to access to information, defamation, regulatory bodies and other laws involving journalists and the media. Encouraging implementation of good legislation is an activity of OSCE, and one participant said it is effective because governments only respond to OSCE's reinforcement. Others said this needs to be stronger and go beyond press releases and warnings. Often the laws are delayed for months from their original drafting and then changed without debate or deliberation, according to Jadranka Vojvodić from Podgorica. She said the legislators should consult the regulator before changing draft legislation and encouraged more politicians and lawmakers to be actively involved in future SEEMC, especially on panels where they can participate in the discussions.

Helena Mandić of Sarajevo reflected on the post-war period when the international community intervened in South East Europe's media sector.   'Maybe at the time when these laws were passed we needed more awareness-raising about what they mean,' she said. There was concern in Bosnia that parliamentarians did not quite understand or agree with the laws when the international community pushed for their adoption, and now the authorities tend to ignore them.

Q: What are the greatest legal challenges facing your country right now?

A: It's the usual story , the implementation. If you're talking about the current legislative framework, there is actually adherence to it. But the legislation is too easily changed. There is no regular debate before any change is considered. The legislature does not consult or ask for the regulator about their position, such as, "We want some new solutions, what can you offer?" The current solutions are not given a real chance, this is a challenge.
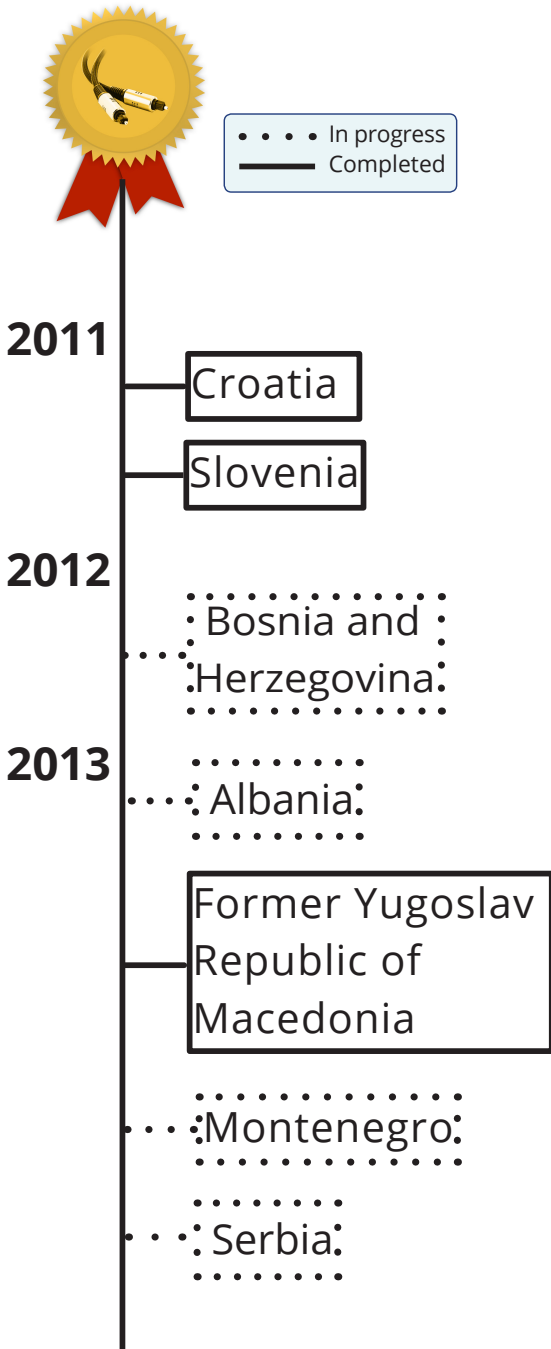
- Jadranka Vojvodić

Q: How has the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media contributed to change in the country's media sector?

A: OSCE has a voice, it has credibility, and I think governments cannot escape OSCE obligations. They have been very good also at ensuring participation of the public, NGOs and civil society in this process because sometimes government does things because OSCE is asking, not because they really want to do. They have also been guardians of filtering the bad things in legislation for example.

– Remzi Lani

In progress · · · · ·
Completed ———

2011
Croatia
Slovenia

2012
Bosnia and Herzegovina

2013
Albania

Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

Montenegro

Serbia

Digitalization

The third SEEMC focused on digitalization as a major topic because of the on-going progress of most countries in the region to transition from analog to digital television. A masterclass on the benefits, challenges and necessary steps for digital switchover took place during the conference, resulting in five concrete recommendations by the participants for authorities in the region.[4]

When asked about digitalization, both interviewees from Sarajevo expressed concern that the process is overly politicized and is therefore stagnant and unable to move forward toward completion. Vojvodić is unsure how broadcasters will be able to cope with the change because 'they have to invest in new equipment and people and this is a challenge.' In general, however, Vojvodić said technical standards have improved in radio and television in the past 10 years.

Asja Rokša Zubčević of Sarajevo said the OSCE could better support the digitalization process by raising awareness of its importance in political structures, 'especially emphasizing the dangers of fast-approaching DSO and possible consequences it would have on media market should DSO not happen, but should also emphasize the potential values in digital dividend.'

Public Service Broadcasting: Time for a New Model?

The international community's involvement in South East Europe's media development in the late 1990s focused heavily on public service broadcasting (PSB) with the goal of creating sustainable, high-quality programming akin to the BBC. However, several respondents reacted with visible frustration when asked about the strength of PSB in their countries. Kontić said that PSB journalists might face less financial problems than colleagues in private media, but general feedback revealed that on-air quality is lacking across the region. Mandić said the PSB has 'a lot of work to do' to reach the level of educating the public, especially the large illiterate segment of Bosnia's population which would most benefit from a strong public broadcaster. Vojvodić said public service programming is lacking in Montenegro, and she thinks this is because politicians do not have a 'genuine understanding' of public service. She would like to see more lawmakers present at future SEEMC in order to increase their understanding and support.

An interesting suggestion that emerged from the interviews was that public service media might benefit from a new model that is based online, bypassing television and radio, which are so far unsuccessful platforms for public programming in the region. Mandić said Bosnia's PSB has a strong website but should revamp to attract younger audiences as they are most likely to watch content online. Mark Thompson, an international media expert present at the conference, said exclusive web presence might be the future for PSB in the region because he has witnessed impressive websites despite the 'very unhealthy condition' of many broadcasters. Such a shift would require rethinking the content output because, as Kontić said, video that goes online should be different from video watched on television. Anything online, he said, should be interactive and targeted at a specific, web-savvy audience.

Websites of the region's PSBs show potential to become the main platform for public service media in South East Europe.

Conference Feedback

When asked their thoughts about the impact and direction of the SEEMC, respondents gave recommendations for what and who they would like to see at future conferences.

30% of respondents want more youth representation.

'What one doesn't get at this event is a sense of generational change and that's something which would be great if it could be incorporated in the future…. The average age of participants at this conference is a good deal higher than the average age of media professionals in the region.' – *Mark Thompson*

'I think the next step is to include the younger generation. I'm working with students of all different backgrounds and they have completely different views on existing problems and if you don't include them in the debate it's a dinosaur society**.** We are talking about issues which are not important for the generation which is now politically active and who will be absolutely politically active in ten years.' – *Sandra Bašić Hrvatin*

22% want to hear more from voices in the online media.

'We see small initiatives (online), usually start ups with very little money, of a local kind … often with a lot of cultural content. … That brings me back to the point I made earlier about the representation here. I would have thought that the energies of the internet are likely to be finding their most interesting expression in these micro outlets rather than through the online presence of the established linear media.' – *Mark Thompson*

44% said they enjoy seeing friends & colleagues with the same mindset and goals for media freedom in the region.

'We find out that many of the countries have similar problems so it is very awesome to hear how other people other media in other countries how they solve their problems.' – *Sanja Ivačić Perović*

Another 44% said the SEEMC is the only forum in the region where these topics are addressed.

'If we do not talk about these issues then they will just be put under the carpet and people will forget about them.' – *Helena Mandić*

'The topics are adjusted very well based on the needs – what is now urgent.' – *Remzi Lani*

22% feel civil society and activist groups should be better represented at SEEMC.

Annex

Footnotes

1. 2011 SEEMC Full Conference Declaration: http://www.osce.org/fom/83941
2. 2012 SEEMC Full Conference Declaration: http://www.osce.org/fom/95029
3. 2013 SEEMC Full Conference Declaration: http://www.osce.org/fom/106105
   2013 SEEMC Event Page: http://www.osce.org/event/see_mc2013
4. Recommendations from Masterclass on the Digital Switchover: http://www.osce.org/fom/106117

Interviewees

Name	Position	City
Alban Zeneli	President, Union of Journalists	Prishtinë/ Priština
Asja Rokša Zubčević	Head of Division of Audiovisual Services and International Cooperation in Broadcasting at Communications Regulatory Agency	Sarajevo
Boro Kontić	Director, Media Centre Sarajevo	Sarajevo
Helena Mandić	Director of Broadcasting, Communications Regulatory Agency	Sarajevo
Jadranka Vojvodić	Electronic and Broadcast Media expert	Podgorica
Mark Thompson	International Media consultant	London
Remzi Lani	Director, Albanian Media Institute	Tirana
Sandra Bašić Hrvatin	Professor, University of Ljubljana	Ljubljana
Sanja Ivačić Perović	Deputy Editor, Beta News Agency	Belgrade
Zdenko Duka	President, Croatian Journalists' Association	Zagreb

Interview Questions

1. Were you working in the media industry in your country in 1998?
2. What were the major problems facing your country's media sector in 1998 (nb *going back 15 yrs...*)?
3. Do journalists practice self-censorship? Why?
4. How is the public media literacy in your country? Do people trust the mainstream media?
5. What is the state of public service broadcasting in your country?
6. What are the greatest legal challenges facing the media in your country?
7. Do media houses have sustainable business strategies? Is journalism a viable profession in your country?
8. What role do business and corporate interests play in media coverage? Is this still a major problem across mainstream media in your country or is this changing?
9. What are the most important challenges still facing your country's media sector?
10. How has the OSCE contributed to change in your country's media sector if it all?
11. What do you think about the South East Europe Media Conference? Is it a positive contribution to the region?
12. What challenges and/or opportunities do new media pose for journalism in your country?