



Organization for Security and
Co-operation in Europe
Presence in Albania

**REMARKS BY THE HEAD OF THE OSCE PRESENCE IN ALBANIA,
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Session I:

Freedom of Expression in the Western Balkans and Turkey: Progress and persisting challenges

When observing the media situation in South East Europe today, there are some peculiarities that seem to be specific for this region, while others represent more universal challenges to improving and securing freedom and independence of media.

Freedom and independence of media are distinct concepts that nevertheless are interdependent: There can be no freedom of media without independence of media.

The first striking phenomenon is the **multitude of media** in a relatively small market. This rather impenetrable jungle of local and national media leads to an excess supply for a comparably small number of consumers.

At a first sight one might be tempted to think that this oversupply is positive and provides the consumers with a wide range of different information, opinions and levels of quality.

But a more thorough investigation into this ostensible media pluralism leads to the rather unfortunate conclusion that:

- the content of the available information remains limited,
- information is mainly focussed on domestic issues,
- news items are often copy/pasted without double checking and
- the pressure to deliver news, especially for the many channels that broadcast information in a 24 hour format, often leads to the virtual creation of media hypes on topics that do not deserve such exaggerated attention.

This phenomenon of a media jungle might still be explained as a reaction to the fact that during the former dictatorial or authoritarian regimes, the media situation was rather comparable to an information desert. However, from an economic point of view, most of the media can hardly be economically viable.

This lack of economic sustainability has negative repercussions on the quality and reliability of information. It also makes the media vulnerable to outside pressure and influences affecting their editorial independence.

Another phenomenon having a strong impact on the **editorial independence** is the ownership structure of media.

In many cases, the ownership structure is not clear enough, which is a direct collision with the notion of transparency, as one of key tasks of media in a democratic society. However, in some cases it is well-known which ownership structure lays behind the media outlets, in particular for well-established influential media and media groups. Most of the latter are owned by business people, companies or groups, where the media in many cases represents just an additional business activity.

As a result, media activities are often used for the promotion of particular interests that go beyond the original scope of media, which are provision of reliable information, entertainment and education. This includes limits on editorial independence.

In turn, limited editorial independence leads to limited trust regarding the content presented in media and a general lack of trust towards the media as such. The result is a situation, where on the one side in most of the Western Balkan countries there is abundance of media outlets but on the other side a very limited trust in them. The number of quality media remains very low. However, the internet could provide an opportunity to counterbalance this prevailing trend.

The third phenomenon I would like to mention is related to the **employment situation** of journalists in the Western Balkans region.

There seems to be a wide spread practice of weakening the professional independence of journalists by keeping them personally dependent on their employers in violation of legal provisions. This mainly takes the form of illicit employment or delays in the payment of salaries and remunerations. While this irregular situation might be due to financial constraints faced for example by economically unviable media, it might also be done on purpose to maximize control over the journalist.

This leads to a situation where many journalists remain unprotected not only vis-à-vis their employers, but also against outside pressures and influences. This has a negative impact on overall professional standards. More importantly, it brings the risk of self-censorship.

What are some **possible solutions** to the shortcomings mentioned so far?

What should be the appropriate reaction to a situation where at a first glance freedom of media and freedom of expression seem not be harmed by outside restrictions, but where the lack of independence, in particular editorial independence, caused by economic restraints, pressure through economic means and self-censorship, is directly resulting in strong limitations on these freedoms?

How can the overgrown jungle that has replaced the media desert be structured in a way that does not interfere with the freedom of media or expression?

I am convinced that we neither have to reinvent the wheel nor hope for extraordinary inspiration. Solutions have already been formulated; appeals and declarations are continuously repeated. The main addressees are still politics and the judiciary. Active political commitment to guaranteeing freedom and independence of media and the commitment of the judiciary, to effectively defend freedom and independence of media by applying the laws, are the precondition to securing editorial independence.

Another promising way to secure freedom of expression and editorial independence is the transformation of public broadcasters into independent, credible and accountable institutions. These should have a programme planning based on quality and a well-defined education mandate, as well as an information policy based on impartiality and reliability.

Let me here refer to a concrete example from Albania: The OSCE Presence in Albania together with the public broadcaster itself started a comprehensive reform and modernization programme for Albania's public broadcaster. Close partners in this ambitious project are the Parliamentary Committee on Media and Education, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, the European Broadcasting Union and UNESCO.

The main challenge to implementing this solution does not lay in the availability of professional journalists or the disposal of the necessary financial means. The main effort has to be shown by the competing political forces to agree to such an independent institution, serving everybody and guaranteeing fair play and providing quality content.

The "Third OSCE South East Europe Media Conference", held in Tirana in September 2013 summed up the necessary actions. It sounds very simple, but it still requires a huge effort not only in Albania but throughout the whole region: *"The authorities have the responsibility to create a legal and regulatory environment that will guarantee political, editorial and financial independence of public service broadcasters."*