

INTERVIEW Antonella Cerasino, Spokesperson of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, on media situation

Media freedom in Croatia at an enviable level

Propagandistic and warmongering journalism has been replaced by tabloids and sensations; instead of facing direct political pressures, Croatia's journalists nowadays face economic pressures and media owners' interests ▪ Presence of minorities in the mainstream media is increasing, which is a positive step forward and a result of general democratization of society

Interviewed by: Davor Marko

The OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) Mission to Croatia was established in April 1996, at the moment when this country faced problems caused by a recently ended war. The Mission's basic tasks were to provide assistance to the authorities towards achieving a satisfactory level of democracy, rule of law and respect of human rights. Media freedoms, protection of minorities, return and integration, establishment of the rule of law, as well as the establishment of a stable political system are among the main activity areas of the OSCE Mission today.

The heritage of communism, consequences of the war and interethnic antagonisms have resulted in a partial implosion of the concept of media freedoms and led to the appearance of propagandistic journalism. The OSCE Mission played a significant role in the promotion of media freedoms, freedom of speech and expression and development of the media in general. The years-long efforts were productive and, in 2003, the Croatian Parliament passed a series of important media laws, such as the Law on the Croatian Radio and Television, the Law on Electronic Media, the Media Law, the Law on Telecommunications and the Law on Free Access to Information. The assistance of OSCE and Venice Commission's experts was priceless in the process of drafting those laws.

At the end of 2006, the OSCE Mission to Croatia will be restructured and one of the units to be closed is the Media Unit. In an interview for *Hrvatska rijec*, Antonella Cerasino, the Spokesperson of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, said that the reason for this is a satisfactory situation in the media field, but also Croatia's significant progress with regard to respecting and enjoying media freedoms.

There can be two different approaches to the media. On one side, we have the so-called "technical approach", and on the other side, the political approach. When talking about the technical aspect, this first of all implies the existing media legislation which needs to be amended and harmonized with the European legislation. The OSCE is very active in the field of obtaining and establishing professional standards in the media. For example, the provision of the Criminal Code which stipulated imprisonment for libel was amended this year in Croatia. We had to lobby among top state officials for a long time for something like this. There are more laws

in Croatia which regulate the work of the media, such as the Law on the HRT or the Law on Electronic Media, on which the authorities need to work and adjust them to European standards.

When talking about the political aspect of our Mission, what I primarily have in mind are certain pressures and endangerment of media freedom on the part of political and economic interest groups. We treat media freedoms and the right to free expression as one of the basic human rights which should be maximally respected. Their respect is also one of the preconditions for joining the EU, mentioned in the framework of the Copenhagen Criteria. Apart from these basic tasks, the OSCE pays a lot of attention to education and training of journalists, for the purpose of enhancing their skills and specialization for particular fields. In this period, we are concentrating on the education of journalists with regard to reporting about elections, and this will be the main topic for this year and, at the same time, a preparation for the forthcoming parliamentary elections in Croatia. We are planning to train and specialize journalists for reporting on war crime trials, as well as to improve communication between journalists and representatives of the authority institutions through various programmes and projects.

According to the latest report of Reporters Without Borders, Croatia is, when it comes to media freedoms, located in the middle and ranks as 56th country (last year it ranked as 64th). Both Bosnia and Herzegovina (33) and Macedonia (43) are higher ranked, while Serbia and Montenegro rank as 65th. How do you comment on Croatia's ranking and what are the main reasons for such a ranking?

Taking into account the fact that situation with media freedoms is not ideal anywhere (*for example, the U.S. fell to number 44, author's remark*), Croatia's ranking could be interpreted as satisfactory. The main reason for 56th position is definitely legislation, which is still non-harmonised but which, on the other hand, represents one of the key criteria for awarding points to the countries on the list of Reporters Without Borders. There were also several incidents which, in my opinion, affected the fact that Croatia's ranking is worse than the ranking of some neighbouring countries. Unlike EU countries, Croatia and other countries in the region still do not have sufficiently strong institutions that would react in a situation when media freedoms are jeopardized. Existing institutions, such as the Print Media Council and similar, are still weak and it is necessary to work on their strengthening.

In Croatia we also had several cases of political pressures on journalists, but also on editors of particular shows who were relieved of duty "under suspicious circumstances". You already commented this occurrence on one occasion and stated that you were concerned about that and that it would be desirable to "relieve editors of duty for the purpose of having a higher-quality and better media outlet instead of linking this with certain political and financial influence". What is your comment?

Unfortunately, different types of pressure on journalists still exist in Croatia. Not only political ones, but also pressures of economic nature are something that media professionals are encountering on a daily basis. The situation is much different when we compare Zagreb and media in local communities, where pressures are still strong primarily because the media, in the majority of cases, are owned by local authorities. What is important is that the situation will be constantly monitored during 2007 because the elections were called for the end of the year, during which period

the role of the media gains in importance. During 2006 we had several cases where we intervened through recommendations and press releases. Such was the case with the appointment of members of HINA Steering Committee, who were first appointed by the authorities and then those same authorities withdrew their decision. There was an interesting case regarding relief of duty of an editor in Vjesnik, and it remains to be seen what will happen with *Mirko Galic*, who announced that he was withdrawing from the position of director general of the state television and moving into diplomacy.

When we are talking about direct pressures on journalists, in most cases we see problems related to censorship or adapting to the editorial policy of their media. In Croatia, but also in a large number of European countries, you do not have clearly oriented left- and right-wing media, but such orientation mostly depends on the person performing the duty of editor-in-chief or owning the media outlet. This makes the situation for journalists themselves even more complicated, because it is difficult for them when the media outlet suddenly changes its orientation due to a change of owner or editor-in-chief.

Current situation on media market in Croatia seems like a monopoly by one media empire backed by Europa Press Holding (EPH), while there are very few media which do not belong to at least one of the media lobbies. Former propagandistic journalism was replaced by tabloidization.

Along with political pressure on which there is a lot of discursion, there are also different kinds of economic pressures that are nowadays perhaps even more important when we are talking about media. In that context we can also talk about media ownership and the trend of tabloidization to which the majority of privately-owned media is prone. Tabloids are best sellers and the most sought form of newspapers, they attract most advertisers and that is the only thing owners are interested in nowadays. Another problem pertains to journalists themselves, to their mentality. During the 90s journalists understood their job as some kind of a mission, such as fighting for independence of their profession and as much freedom of expression as possible within an unappreciative environment. Back then, they had goals and ideals for which they were fighting, but now things have changed. The former mission has been fulfilled and it is necessary to adapt to a new situation. To seek new missions, new priorities, and those could be exploration efforts aimed at detecting and eliminating corruption and nepotism, to write in a critical and competent manner about war crimes, all in all not to live in and from the past any longer, but look to the future.

HR: Lack of investigative topics and a small number of journalists dealing with investigative work is a problem not only in Croatia but also in the region as a whole.

There are two sides to this problem. On one side, you have unwillingness of media owners themselves to invest into and support investigative journalism and, according to the situation nowadays, it is more profitable for them to publish different trivialities and sensations from people's lives than to be involved in one issue for the long-term. That is also a type of indirect pressure.

Inadequate and necessary training for journalists is another problem and also something the OSCE is intensively working on. Improvement of journalistic skills is one of our priorities. When we speak about Croatia in particular, there is another problem which is that for many journalists, news, that is, facts are statements by

public figures from the politics and show business. That becomes a fact that is validly used precisely in a situation lacking investigative activities. Sometimes, when there is a story about a particular problem not all sides of this story are there, frequently one processes only one side which is not sufficient for the whole truth. Due to all that it is necessary to continuously educate and train journalists. *Europa Press Holding* announced the opening of its academy for journalists and that is a positive step.

HR: The OSCE activities are to a large extent related to minorities; how are they treated by the Croatian media?

Minority media, but also the majority of local media, play a very important role in informing minority groups. The OSCE has worked with minorities a lot. We were sponsors of a large number of specialized programs, precisely because their potential audience is not big, they do not attract advertisers and they have their own needs and legally defined rights. In such a situation they need to be supported. Quite frequently the OSCE organizes trainings for minority representatives. The goal of those trainings is that representatives of national minorities become trained for communicating with media and such projects were organized throughout Croatia, in Vukovar, Zadar, Slavonski Brod, Gospić...Minority-related legislation is highly developed in Croatia but minority representatives have not been using it adequately. Frequently, representatives of minorities are passive and mostly wait for the media to get interested in their affairs while on the other hand the media alone do not know what is happening and what is important. That is why a two-way communication is important.

HR: Two things are important when we talk about minorities in the media. The first is their presence in the mainstream media and the second are minority media with their narrow focus and specific content. The first are criticized that their coverage of minorities is inadequate, mostly through incidents and sensations, and others that their focus is too narrow and contributes to further segregation and ghettoisation. How can one find a balance here?

The situation in Croatia is slowly changing. Minorities are more and more present in the mainstream media as well. We noticed certain difficulties and discrimination in the written texts of some papers such as *Vecernji list*, but we anticipate that the change of their editor-in-chief would contribute to a more correct coverage of minority groups. When we talk about electronic media, there are certain commitments regarding production and broadcast of specialized programme for minorities both, at the local and national level. The specialized programme on HRT is called "*Prizma*" and is broadcast once a week, while a representative of national minorities participates in the work of the HRT Programme Council. Minority topics are represented in Croatia in a satisfactory range and it is not brought down only to propaganda by the minority groups themselves. The Serbian minority is the most numerous in Croatia and it publishes its papers such as *Identitet*, *Novosti* and *Sedam dana*. We have good cooperation with their representatives. Honestly, we avoid providing too much help any particular paper of any minority but we try to promote minorities through a more objective media approach in the mainstream media. However, we are aware that specific minority media also serve to inform their minority audience on specific and important issues but a part of these issues is also significant and interesting for the wider environment.