

SELF-REGULATION IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE

General Overview

Prior to the political transformation around 1990, the print press and the broadcast media were under political control in the then state socialist countries of South East and East Central Europe. Albeit, especially in the 1980s, the degree of pressure put upon the press and media varied across these countries, as a general rule the political elites used newspapers and broadcasters as an instrument of mobilisation, propaganda and indoctrination, and considered journalists the 'soldiers of the party'. The journalists' subordination to the political elites—whether institutionalised, i.e., based on written regulation, or non-institutionalised, i.e., realised through informal methods—had the unwelcome effect of, among other things, hindering the professional development of the journalism communities, including the elaboration and enforcement of self-regulatory mechanisms.

With the liberation of the press and media from under political control from the late 1980s onward—a process that, many analysts argue, has been unfinished to date—journalists in the region encountered new challenges. They were to abide by new standards of journalism, i.e., to inform rather than to indoctrinate, and to act as the 'watchdogs of democracy' rather than the 'soldiers of the party'. Privatisation exposed them to the laws of the market: they were to meet audience demand rather than political expectations. Dependence on circulation figures and audience rates has driven editorial boards and journalists' associations to engage in a process of self-regulation in order to (re-)gain public trust that had been largely lost in the previous decades. Self-regulation, of course, is a way to show that journalists are aware of their social responsibility; it is the acknowledgement of the fact that they represent the general public (as opposed to particular interest groups) and thereby the major values of a democratic society.

The press and the media are multi-actor industries. The various actors involved, in one way or another, in the production process—namely the owners, the journalists, the advertisers, the politicians and, not least, the audiences—have different, if not conflicting interests. Self-regulation, or rather co-regulation, is an important instrument to harmonise diverging interests. At the same time, because political journalists frequently work in a 'crossfire' of different interests, the road to consensus on journalistic standards that serve the interests of the entire democratic community is hard and often painful. It is perhaps for this reason that the adoption of self-regulatory mechanisms has been a slow and, to date, unfinished process. The adoption of efficient self-regulatory mechanisms has been hindered by a number of other unfavourable circumstances as well, the most noteworthy of which are

- the lack of a tradition of and experience with self-regulation across the region,
- the political cleavages dividing the journalism communities and the resulting lack of dialogue and solidarity among the various 'fractions' of journalists which often prevented the journalism communities in the region from jointly defending their common interests,
- the small size of the press and media markets and the general under-development of national economies across the region: the press and media markets can sustain but a few newspapers and broadcasters, as a result of which the rest of them have to ally with the various political forces in search for financial support,

- persisting political pressure on, especially, the public service media and enhancing loyal journalism (as opposed to critical journalism), and
- close cooperation and mutual dependence among the political elites and business groups with a vested interest in the press and media industries, exposing journalists to both political and economic dependence.

Self-regulation has, of course, been a slow and open-ended process even in consolidated democracies such as the United States of America, and there are no universal patterns to follow. Journalism standards are highly debated around the globe. Some theorists argue for objectivity (i.e., the pursuit of fairness, internal pluralism and neutrality when covering current political and moral issues), while others reject the ideal of objective journalism as a ‘mission impossible’ whose pursuit would necessarily leave to failure. However difficult, a process of self-regulation has been launched in South East and East Central Europe and, along with it, professional discussions on the proper nature of journalism standards have been imported. The late 1990s and the early 2000s saw in most of the consolidating post-communist democracies several attempts to implement and to enforce various self-regulatory mechanisms, and especially the adoption of ethic codes and the establishment of ethic commissions.

It may be too early to assess the efficiency of such measures as yet. For sure, the performance of the journalism communities across the region is well beyond rhetoric expectations. Whereas most ethic codes are a reflection of the standards of *neutrally objective* journalism as based on an idealised Anglo-Saxon model, in practice a huge part of the journalism communities pursue the norms of *partisan journalism* of the European tradition. Exposed to existential threat or worse, many journalists have given up their independent status and have become yes-men of the various political forces.

Whereas most journalism communities and several newsrooms in the region have adopted codes of ethics and several of them have ethic commissions, other instruments of self-regulation are sporadic or completely lacking. In particular,

- most of the countries in the region have no professional for such as journalism reviews to discuss controversial ethic issues and cases;
- few of the journalism communities have professional awards to honour and to promote quality journalism;
- the establishment of newsroom ombudspersons to publicly discuss complaints submitted by the audiences has hardly began,
- the institutions for higher-level journalism education are rare and, mostly, little efficient.

In addition to the under-development of self-regulation, the ownership structure of the press and media is as a general rule hidden before the public eye, even though its transparency could be a key factor enhancing public trust.

Of particular importance is for a democratic society the status of investigative journalism. It is a widely held view that journalists are supposed to reveal cases of corruption and abuses of power in order to ensure the transparency of the political system. As already mentioned, however, the weak financial position of most press and media outlets is a major obstacle to such journalism. Few titles can afford to fund the work of investigative journalists for several weeks or months in

the hope of a single reportage to be publicised at a later point in time. Without financial independence, there is no political independence; the lack of resources, and especially that of state subsidies distributed on a politically neutral basis to socially relevant yet economically unviable titles, continues to be a major obstacle to independent journalism.

In regards with self-regulation, some of the recurring recommendations of a recent survey on media self-regulatory patterns and defamation legislations conducted by SEENPM address the following issues:

- (1) involvement: the widest possible range of actors, including non-governmental organisations, should be involved into discussions on the proper nature of journalistic standards;
- (2) public awareness: it is also a widely held view that the public eye should be better drawn to the existence and content of the adopted ethic codes and other instruments of self-regulation;
- (3) state support: the state should be more active in supporting self-regulatory efforts, possibly by providing financial resources for the work of ethics commissions;
- (4) newsroom ombudspersons: introduction of newsroom ombudspersons in order to publicly discuss controversial ethical cases and issues;
- (5) journalism education: an effort that both the state and the owners should be actively involved in;
- (6) transparency of the ownership structure of the press and media should be improved in order to re-gain public trust in journalism.

It comes out that the various ‘fractions’ of the national journalism communities should join forces in order to enhance professional journalism and to jointly defend media freedom, as the current division of journalists, attested by, among other things, the existence of a high number of journalists’ associations, is a major obstacle on the road leading to professionalisation and to political independence.

In sum, the past decade has seen several efforts to enhance professional journalism in the countries of South East and East Central Europe. These efforts, however, have too frequently been too little coordinated and ongoing debates among press and media professionals on the proper way to, and nature of, efficient self-regulation and regulation have not reached a consensus as yet. Now is the time to highlight and to define the key problems of journalism in the region, to initiate further professional debate on ethic and legislative issues, and to offer recommendations for the improvement of the current situation.