

Mass Media, Post-conflict Transformation and Transition: Why Is It Bodo and Not Katharine?

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Journalists have been in the “eye of the hurricane” of regime change in post-communist countries over the last two decades. The mass media acted in Europe’s democratising countries as agents of transition, while at the same time also experiencing deep change. The transition from single-party rule and state-command economies, in some cases also involving the formation of new states, were dramatic and often conflict-laden processes. Mass media were among the driving forces of “soft” revolutions such as in Czechoslovakia, as well as among the protagonists of violent regime change, for instance in Romania. What journalists wrote did not only reflect the turmoil, it was also influenced by it and even responsible for it at times.

In the case of Yugoslavia, transition took place amidst a series of violent ethno-political disputes leading to the disintegration of the federal state. The mass media, for the most part, became an integral part of the war effort under the command of the warring nationalistic political elites, much as they once were the “transmission belt of power” of the single-party regime during the period after the Second World War until the first multiparty elections.¹ To prevent such conflicts in the future and to establish durable stability in Europe, the European Union (EU) facilitated, at the beginning of the 21st century, the perspective for the countries of former Yugoslavia less Slovenia and including Albania (the region now called “Western Balkans”) to become its members once the regional conflicts were peacefully transformed and the societies had completed their political and economic transition. Similarly, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) invited these countries to apply for membership. Thus, a region of Europe that was non-aligned for many decades (or, as in the case of Albania, in self-chosen isolation) moved towards geopolitical and social “westernization.”

* The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent the opinion of any institution.

¹ C.f. Nena Skopljanac Brunner, Stjepan Gredelj, Alija Hodžić, and Branimir Krištofić, eds., *Media & War* (Zagreb, Belgrade: Centre for Transition and Civil Society Research, Agency Argument, 2000).

One of the central targets in the process of democratization in the countries formerly under single-party rule was the creation of “Europeanised” media ecology.² The same delivery was expected from the post-conflict states once the process of reconstruction and modernisation could take off. Essentially, the EU and the West are transforming the institutional fabric of the rest of the continent according to their own model. They expect this transformation to produce lasting changes affecting all segments of the society, including the performance of journalists and the structure of the media.

The “*Matryoshka Principle*”

Western aid organizations invested opulent sums to support the transformation of the mass media in democratising countries in Europe. According to figures (which are conservative and probably imprecise) published by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Western countries in 2007 disbursed worldwide almost 82 million USD in official development assistance for radio, television, and print media.³ In 2008, the European Commission alone spent 81 Million USD for media assistance funding and the United States 124 Million USD. Western Balkan countries receive millions of Euro for media development as part of the EU's Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). Significant sums are also channelled via international organisations such as the United Nations Organisations for Education, Science and Communication (UNESCO), as well as the World Bank.

Democratising countries embarked on thorough changes: adopting new media legislation, fostering the privatisation of the print media and the broadcasting industry, and replacing state radio and television by public service channels; university journalism curricula were adapted to Western models, while external media assistance organisations financed a multitude of training courses for reporters and editors.⁴

The justification for international media assistance and other forms of external intervention into the media sector of post-conflict and democratising states was the assumption that media and communication can be used to achieve positive (peace-

² An erudite and succinct discussion of media transition is offered by Karol Jakubowicz and Miklós Sükösd, “Twelve Concepts Regarding Media System Evolution and Democratization in Post-Communist Societies,” in *Finding the Right Place on the Map: Central and Eastern European Media Change in a Global Perspective*, ed. Karol Jakubowicz and Miklós Sükösd, Intellect Books (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 9–40.

³ C.f. Mary Myers, *Funding for Media Development by Major Donors Outside the United States* (Washington D.C.: National Endowment for Democracy, Center for International Media Assistance, 3 December 2009), p. 45, <http://cima.ned.org>.

⁴ The Media Centres in Sarajevo or the School of Journalism in Novi Sad are among the institutions with a high reputation in the field of journalism training in the Western Balkans.

building) outcomes and that they are a requirement for lasting good governance. Much as journalists and the mass media were perceived to have played a crucial role in sustaining authoritarian rule in the formerly socialist countries and to have been instrumental in forging conflict and war in ex-Yugoslavia, they are now expected to be among the most important agents for successful post-conflict reconciliation and transition in general.⁵

This expectation is based on two assumptions:

- The first one is that as part of the Europeanisation thrust, the system of political communication, with the mass media (now powered by democratic journalists and editors) being its pivotal component, will adapt and subsequently perform according to existing Western models;
- The second one is that in times of conflict and transition, which generate heightened uncertainty in society, people will turn to the media as the most important source of information to help them understand the ongoing political developments and to gain reassurance when anxiety rises. Increased exposure to reformed mass media will enhance liberal post-conflict and/or transition efforts.⁶

Starting from this conceptual basis in the democratisation discourse, a series of further expectations regarding the role of journalists and the mass media was generated.⁷ Attributions regarding the possible jobs of the media follow a sequence that can be called the "*democratization matryoshka principle*" ("nested doll principle"). In the imagined series of nested dolls, security sector reform is probably the last and most difficult area of reform to be "uncovered" by the mass media.

⁵ c.f. Dušan Reljić, "The News Media and the Transformation of Ethnopolitical Conflicts," in *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation*, edited version August 2004, ed. Martina Fischer, Hans J. Gießman, and Beatrix Schmelzle; http://www.berghof-handbook.net/documents/publications/reljic_handbook.pdf.

⁶ c.f. Dr. Matthew Loveless, "Media Dependency: Mass Media as Sources of Information in the Democratizing Countries of Central and Eastern Europe," *Democratization* 15:1 (February 2008), p. 175 ff.

⁷ The Council of Europe produced a handbook, ostensibly broadly designed but meant for democratizing countries: *Media and Democracy* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 1998). UNESCO's *Public Service Broadcasting. A Best Practices Sourcebook* (Paris, 2005) is also available on CD. *Media and Elections. An Elections Reporting Handbook*, by Ross Howard (Copenhagen, 2004), was produced by the Danish NGO International Media Support. The EU supported in 2009 a major project, led by the London-based Media Diversity Institute, to present best practices by and about the media, related to non-discrimination and the promotion of diversity, throughout 30 European countries. The number of such publications with instructions for journalists is impressive.

In this discourse, in accordance with the liberal theory of power division in the state, mass media are assigned to act as the “fourth power” in society. They are expected to monitor, on behalf of the public interest, the legislative, executive and judiciary power and to raise alarm if they detect abuse. Consequently, journalists are also expected to tackle the security sector. Its transformation belongs to the essence of democratisation: after all, authoritarian rule rests on the use and abuse of the “ministries of power,” by its heads and personnel, the “*siloviki*.”⁸ Democracy can only be achieved if security sector reform is undertaken and the “ministries of power” are placed under the control of the parliament and other political institutions. Yet, many old and non-transparent networks of “*siloviki*” still operate in the new political, social and economic environment, including the media, making democratic control over the security sector difficult to achieve.

Democratic consolidation means, to a great extent, overcoming the alienation and fear that ordinary citizens felt when dealing with the “ministries of power” in the old regimes. It means building trust in the political process which should guarantee democratic control over the security sector. Among the social institutions in democratising countries, it is the liberalised mass media that are thought to have the highest capacity to inform society about the progress of security sector reform, and to unveil and tackle the final “*matryoshka*” in the chain. By constantly scrutinising the progress of security sector reform, the mass media are actually providing an impetus to this process. This is because they are assumed to have “Europeanised” in the new system and also because people are increasingly turning to the media and other outlets with greater trust for information, context and interpretation.⁹

In a similar vein, in post-conflict and fragile states the mass media are considered to be capable of playing a vital role in “helping to rebuild social cohesion, to promote a culture of tolerance and to help prevent countries regressing into conflict.”¹⁰ The literature puts forward that in “fragile and post-conflict states....support for independent media is crucial both on its own and to shore up the development of democratic

⁸ A *silovik*, according to Wikipedia, (силови́к, plural: siloviks or siloviki, силови́ки, from the Russian word *сила* for force) denotes politicians from the security or military services, often the officers of the KGB, the Soviet secret service, and military or other security services who came into power. In a broader sense, it refers to security-service personnel in general, and that is the meaning used within this text. A not fully adequate Serbo-Croat expression would be “*čizmaš*” (cf. the novel with this name by Dragoslav Mihailović, Belgrade, 1983).

⁹ For a detailed conceptual elaboration see: Marina Caparini, ed., *Media in Security and Governance: The Role of the News Media in Security* (Nomos / Bonn International Center for Conversion / Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2004).

¹⁰ C.f. *Press Freedom Post-Conflict: A Cause of Instability or Foundation of Democratic Development?* (Copenhagen: International Media Support / Danish National Commission for UNESCO, April 2007), p. 3.

institutions in the long term.”¹¹ Volumes filled with accounts of “best practices” and good advice to journalists and other participants in the process of political communication are at disposal. Once in place, editorially independent, pluralist, diverse, and financially sustainable media are expected to serve as critical components of long-term good governance. Most of them propose that the “international community” and domestic liberal political groups should advance media policy to simultaneously promote market democracy and peace.¹²

After 20 years of transition (and after spending many millions on media development), new realities are in place. It is therefore time to examine what came out of the huge expectations that were invested into journalists and the media as potent agents of post-conflict transformation and system transition.

Three Upshots of Media Transition

Roughly, it is possible to discern three types of media patterns that have emerged in democratising countries of Europe in the post-Soviet period:

- The Central European type,
- The Community of Independent States (CIS) type,
- The Southeast European type.¹³

In most Central European Countries, Western European models were quickly transplanted so that new media laws and ownership structures were soon in place during the transition period. Yet, media policy often followed old habits as demonstrated during the numerous “media wars” over the control over public service broadcasting in Poland, Hungary and other countries. There was an evident “discrepancy between the declared objectives of the laws, and the actual achievements during their implementation.”¹⁴

¹¹ Shanthi Kalathil with John Langlois and Adam Kaplan, *Towards a New Model. Media and Communication in Post-Conflict and Fragile States* (Washington: The World Bank, Development Communication Division, 2008), p. 10.

¹² For a scorching criticism of such concepts see: Tim Allen and Nicole Stremiau, *Media Policy, Peace and State Reconstruction*, Discussion Paper No. 8 (London: LSE, Crises States Development Research Centre, March 2005).

¹³ For a more elaborate analysis of this typology see: Dušan Reljić, “Proliferation or Pluralism? Mass Media in Post-communist Societies,” in *Media, Security and Governance: The Role of the News Media in Security Oversight and Accountability*, 65-78.

¹⁴ C.f. Miklós Sükösd and Péter Bajomi-Lázár, eds., *Reinventing Media: Media Policy Reform in East-Central Europe*, CPS Books (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003), p. 14 ff.

On the territory of the former Soviet Union (with the exemption of the Baltic states) there was more a mimicry of liberal attitudes towards the media than a genuine democratisation effort.

A mixture of the Central European and the CIS type developed in most countries of South-East Europe: depending on the political and economic context in the individual countries at different times, mass media in this part of the continent zigzagged their way.¹⁵

Possibly the most unexpected development was that the dominant new pattern of private media ownership, often in combination with a strong influx of foreign investors in the media industry in former socialist countries, did not trigger the expected democratising effect.¹⁶ In literature, it is considered to be an established fact that higher inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI) to an economy has a positive spill-over effect on its media sector as one of the most important and sensitive institutions. U.S. researchers point out that FDI brings financial independence, bestows technological superiority and enhances quality which, in turn, paves the way for a free and potent media: "The higher the flow of FDI into an economy, the freer and more efficient is the media. Numerically, a 10 percentage point increase in FDI inflows leads to 4.4 unit rise in press freedom."¹⁷

State ownership over the media has indeed significantly diminished in most post-conflict and transition countries. Foreign investors are strongly present in the media industry in most of Central and South-Eastern Europe and particularly so in Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro and the Republic of Macedonia. Huge new private media empires run by "oligarchs" exist not only in the former Soviet Union, but also in Croatia (EPH) and Serbia (Pink TV). Nevertheless, overt political influence by the governments and the political parties is still evident.¹⁸ At the same time, "tabloidisation" in the print media, the "dumbing-down" of content in electronic media in order to attract audiences, scarce investigative journalism and a general lack of ambition to act as the "fourth power" are just some of criticisms directed at many of the media outlets in the post-socialist world.

¹⁵ C.f. Orlin Spassov, ed., *Quality Press in Southeast Europe* (Sofia: Südosteuropäisches Medienzentrum, 2004), p. 7 ff.

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis see: *Media Ownership and its Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism* (Ljubljana: Peace Institute and the South East European Network for Professionalisation of the Media, 2004).

¹⁷ C.f. Nabamita Dutta and Sanjukta Roy, "The Impact of Foreign Direct Investment on Press Freedom," *Kyklos* 62:2 (2009), p. 255.

¹⁸ Indeed, this criticism applies for much of Europe. For a comparative research in 20 European countries see Marius Dragomir and Dušan Reljić, eds., *Television across Europe: Regulation, Policy and Independence* (Budapest: Open Society Institute, 2005), p. 22 ff.

Quality journalism seems to be melting away just as if it was part of climate change, especially since the global financial crisis also struck transitional economies.

In 2009, advertising spending across all media in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, decreased by a fifth.¹⁹ Less advertising spending means, as representatives from media organisations fear, that those media supportive of the government will receive more advertising money, especially at the local level where many media outlets still depend on state subsidies.²⁰ It also means that financially feeble media, avoiding tabloidisation and targeting up-market audiences, face the increasing risk of being crowded out in a packed market. “The pond is small and full of gators,” as one editor-in-chief in Belgrade hinted.

The political, social and economic environments in post-conflict and transition countries differ much from the textbook expectations for democracy building. After 20 years of psychological and economic stress, it is difficult to imagine that journalists in democratising countries are in the position to fulfil high-fledged expectations reflecting what professional journalism should be in an “advanced, market-driven society”:

It is the critical application of analytical knowledge of diverse relevant topics and discourses in research and editorial work in order to give the audience the opportunity to join in public discourse on whatever is relevant to society.²¹

So, what did actually happen to journalism and the mass media in most of the democratising countries of Europe?

Katharine and Bodo

Katharine Graham (1917-2001), who ran her family’s newspaper, the *Washington Post*, for more than two decades, impersonated the expectations of subscribers to the fast and simple democratisation dream in countries of transition. After all, her newspaper’s relentless coverage of the Watergate scandal exposed the misdoings of President Richard Nixon and led to his resignation. Volumes of books and some memorable films were produced celebrating the mass media’s democratic role exemplified in the figure of Katharine Graham and her valiant journalists and editors. Who else, if not this finest and best-known example of journalistic vigour was to be the role-model for

¹⁹ Marius Dragomir quoting data by the “ad behemoth ZenithOptimedia,” Survival Year, *Transitions Online*, 2 December 2009, www.tol.cz.

²⁰ This is the opinion of Dinko Gruhonjić, chairman of the Independent Association of Journalists of Vojvodina. “Politički pritisci i privatizacija najveća muka” (Political pressures and privatisation are the biggest problems.” In the Belgrade Daily *Danas*, 11 January 2010, www.danas.rs.

²¹ Thomas A. Bauer, “Understanding Journalism. Journalism is a Profession in Transition,” *deScripto. A Journal of Media in Southeastern Europe* 1:3 (Spring 2005), devoted to “Educating journalists.”

democratising countries? Instead of Graham, Bodo Hombach embodied the new media age in post-socialist Europe and particularly so in Southeast Europe.

Most people outside Germany and Central and Eastern Europe have probably never heard of this former high government official. After having to resign as chief of the German federal chancellery because of private transactions, Hombach became the first Co-ordinator of the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe in 1999. This institution was created by the EU, the US and other international actors with the purpose of becoming the driving force of post-conflict reconciliation and transition in the region. In 2002, after three years at the helm of the Stability Pact, Hombach was named general manager of the provincial, but prosperous publishing house WAZ in Essen. Hombach expanded the WAZ portfolio in post-communist Europe to the extent that today the company has assets in most countries in Southeast Europe, including the poorest, Albania (a TV station). In Croatia, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Montenegro, its position in the print media market is dominant.

Relatively strict anti-monopoly legislation in Western Europe makes new acquisitions and mergers a troublesome business so that media investors turn to less profitable but also less worrisome opportunities in the East.²² WAZ boasts its own investment model insisting that it does not interfere with the editorial side of the publishing business, but concentrates on increasing income through business optimisation. The outcome is that most of the mass media which are now part of the WAZ group outside Germany look much alike in their mediocrity. They also do not differ much from other press products in these countries or, indeed, from the majority of what is on the offer Europe-wide. A similar story can be told about television, the dominant source of information. Here, Bertelsmann (RTL), Murdoch (News Corporation), Central European Media Enterprises (CME) and some smaller western companies are strongly involved in the transition world. They are present throughout the Western Balkans as well.

On-line journalism products are gaining ground but user numbers are still a negligible quantity compared with television and radio audiences.²³ Moreover, with online media entering the advertising market, siphoning out journalistic capacities and drawing away audiences, especially from the print outlets, the media markets are breaking apart which increases the already grave problems associated with traditional media. Television audiences will fragment further once the countries scrap analogue TV signals and introduce digital broadcasting. Some of them (candidates for membership in the EU) are bound by EU legislation to do so by 2012, and those, who are not under

²² C.f. "Western Media Moguls Swallowing Up the Balkans," July 2003, <http://www.Balkan-Analysis.com>.

²³ For an analytical introduction see: Orlin Spassov and Christo Todorov, eds., *New Media in Southeast Europe* (Sofia: Südosteuropäisches Medienzentrum, 2003).

this obligation, would nevertheless like to abolish analogue TV in order not to lag behind the dominant trend.

The new media world in post-conflict and transition countries does not correspond to its normative attributions in the democratisation discourse. News and current affair reporting are on the retreat in many countries, and newscasts have often become markedly tabloid, particularly on commercial television channels.²⁴ There was a proliferation of mass media outlets, western-type media laws were imported and some regulation introduced into the chaotic media landscape. At present, private owners and western investors play a commanding role in the new context of market economies and party pluralism in the majority of the countries. Yet the sum has not produced "Europeanisation" and the powerful transformative social and political role of the mass media which was expected according to the democracy textbooks. Certainly, most of the mass media are no longer mouthpieces of political parties or economic interests. Hate-speech, verbal atrocities against political opponents, ethnic or sexual minorities or other forms of "non-European" behaviour occur less and less. The return to old times when there was no "*pravda*" (truth) in the "*izvestia*" (news) is difficult to imagine. However, in most cases "reformed" mass media do not offer "quality journalistic discourse" but an "eclectic mix of different stylistic registers." A spreading category of "hybrid press" (a mix of "high" and "low" content) reports about "serious" matters (politics, the economy, etc.) has emerged which pays as much attention as possible to attracting a broad readership by staying "yellow" (tabloid).

The Albanian Media Institute described the "hybrid" or "tabloid" tendency in this way:

... traditional newspapers that so far have been covering mainly political or socio economic news have responded to this trend and have adapted to this increasing demand by providing more space and priority to tabloid news. It has now become a normality to see in the front pages of such traditional newspapers big titles dedicated to gossip or pictures of celebrities.

...

The tendency towards tabloids has become noticeable in television as well with the appearance of more programs or shows that are exclusively dedicated to celebrities. This tendency comes at a cost of other genres or types of journalism which have not been very solid in the past and are now getting further eclipsed by tabloids. Whilst the Albanian media is dominated by the coverage of political affairs and more recently by tabloids, it is suffering from inadequate coverage of economic, social or international affairs.²⁵

²⁴ C.f. *Television Across Europe*, p.40 ff.

²⁵ "The Albanian Press Overtaken by Tabloids," Briefing paper series (The Albanian Media Institute, September 2007), <http://www.institutemedia.org/pages/MEDIA%20WATCH%20-%20Briefing%20Papers.html>.

The Dilemma: Soul or Job

For most “hybrid” or “tabloid” media, performing according to the initially described “*matryoshka principle*” is an unattainable task that many do not even want to fulfil. Mainstream media in Southeast Europe, just like everywhere else, tend to stick to the easier done, cheaper produced and politically less confronting topics. The government exerts informal and discreet but strict control over public service broadcasters, such as RTS in Serbia and HRT in Croatia, so that overly critical reporting is scarce.²⁶

Intrusive reports about the security sector or other sensitive subjects are expensive in every aspect: they are difficult to produce, cost time and money, and trained, experienced and skilful journalists have to be assigned to such tasks. Moreover, disclosing secrets about the heart of power usually provokes harsh retaliation. Governments and particularly members of the security sector, have many means at their disposal to deal with authors of unpleasant disclosures in the mass media. The easiest response is to cut off journalists from access to information. Other means span from frivolous libel cases to barely veiled physical threats and eventual execution.

In most political systems, the security sector, no matter under what degree of scrutiny, remains an enclave of secrecy with little transparency and public insight. This is even more so in the Western Balkans due to the region's recent war history and the involvement of many members of the security sector in crime and corruption. Moreover, reporting about ongoing corruption and crime can be as dangerous as reporting about power abuse by officials, war crimes or ethnic conflict and violence. Already threats against journalists have chilling effects on their readiness to deal with the final “*matryoshka*” and the “*siloviki*.” A tradition of violence against journalists—and there is a long track-record of brutality and *censorship by killing* (a phrase coined by the first OSCE Representative for the Media Freimut Duve) in Southeast Europe—obviously undermines the overall quality of journalism. There has almost not been a single year in the last two decades of transition without journalists being killed in Southeast Europe.²⁷

Some mass media, such as the private B92 television in Belgrade, Serbia, invest in the production of investigative reports such as “Insider”—a serial of revelations often targeting the security sector—and take huge risks by doing this.²⁸ Nonetheless, it is doubtful whether even this company could sustain high journalistic standards without supplementary funding from the EU and external donor organisations.

²⁶ cf. *Television Across Europe*, p.54ff.

²⁷ C.f. Bill Ristow, *Under Attack: Practicing Journalism in a Dangerous World*, a report for the Center for International Media Assistance, Washington, 22 December 2009, <http://cima.ned.org>.

²⁸ www.b92.net/insajder.

A disturbing example is the Split weekly *Feral Tribune* which in 2008 ceased publishing after 15 years during which it acted as the beacon of dissent against nationalistic populism in Croatia. Its systematic investigative reporting about war crimes and high-level corruption brought the paper many enemies in government and business. Few companies were interested or dared to advertise in this paper despite its popularity among readers. *Feral* collapsed due to overwhelming financial troubles.

These two probably best-known examples of journalism with stamina in Southeast Europe show that there is no winning combination for those writers and editors who rely only on their vigour to pursue transparency, accountability and other high ideals. Neither the market nor the political and social conditions have provided the ground for Katharine-Graham-like journalistic impersonations yet. It is evident that in the long run, foreign aid cannot replace sustainable business models. Up to now, quality journalism and financial success have been an oxymoron in Southeast Europe.

Admittedly, many mainstream papers (radio and television stations to a far lesser degree) occasionally manage to score a “scoop” by uncovering cases of corruption and even high-level crime involving the security sector. Often, journalists are deliberately supplied with compromising information about political opponents or economic adversaries. Thus they are used as proxies in the in-fighting between the various fractions in the government, the political class or business arena.

Gaining visibility in a crowded market is an important advantage so that the temptation for reporters and editors to pick up contentious stories, even if the sources are problematic, remains huge. Similarly, the balancing act between pressing for transparency and accountability and supporting political powers that stand for democracy is an everyday dilemma for many journalists, particularly so in post-conflict countries where the memories of the struggle against repression are still fresh.

There cannot be a recipe to this quandary because reporters and editors do not only follow political and other events – they are simultaneously always part of it and act according to their particular political and economic interests. On a general level, the expectation would be that it is pluralism in the media landscape which provides the readers/listeners/viewers with the chance to make an informed choice. In other words, the audience is in the position to detect bias in the mass media if there is a variety of reports and comments to be chosen from.

Economic dependency has replaced much of the previous political control. For a journalist, saving his job is a high priority. “They pay little, but they pay regularly” – this is what a young journalist, employed in a western-owned paper in Southeast Europe, told the author when she was explaining how she overcomes her frustrations. The di-

lemma of how to write “without losing job or soul” has lost little of its urgency for many journalists in this region after so many years of system change.

There can be no doubt that the main responsibility for post-conflict transformation, speedy transition and for democratic control over the security sector lies primarily with the parliament and other democratic political institutions. Particularly in vulnerable and traumatised post-conflict and transition societies, mass media can compensate only to an extent for the inadequate supervision of the security sector within the political process. Even this limited capability rests to a large extent on external backing, be it through financial donations or political protection vis-à-vis the domestic authorities.²⁹ Courageous journalism cannot replace functioning democratic institutions and due political processes, it can only supplement and enhance them. In this mutually beneficial relationship, journalism develops under improving political, economic and social conditions in democratising countries. In deteriorating situations, quality journalism retreats.

The “European Model” Revisited

In a recent assessment of the media situation in the so-called enlargement countries (those wishing to enter the EU, e.g. the so-called Western Balkan countries and Turkey), the European Commission warned at the end of 2009 that freedom of expression remains an issue of concern:

In general, while the main elements of the legal framework for protecting freedom of expression and the media are in place, undue political pressure on media and the rising number of threats and physical attacks against journalists as well as some remaining legal obstacles give rise to serious concern.³⁰

Taking a historical perspective, a sobering assessment is offered by scholars that “a few more decades may be needed ... for the development of supportive political culture and democratic media institutions, including public service media” in democratising Europe.³¹ However, there are also continuing concerns from the European Parliament, civil society organisations and other sources about the situation of the media in consolidated democracies in Europe. In particular, the worsening economic situation of the print and electronic media and the escalating consolidation in the media industry

²⁹ For an overview of external media assistance concepts see: Krishna Kumar, *One Size Does Not Fit All. Objectives and Priority Areas for Media Assistance in Different Societies* (Washington: National Endowment for Democracy, Center for International Media Assistance, 2008), <http://cima.ned.org>.

³⁰ Commission of the European Communities, *Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2009-2010*, COM(2009)533 (Brussels, 14 October 2009), p. 7.

³¹ Jakubowicz and Sükösd, “Twelve Concepts Regarding Media System Evolution and Democratization in Post-Communist Societies,” p. 33.

impact media pluralism and the freedom of expression. In the summer of 2009, the European Commission released the results of an *Independent Study on Indicators for Media Pluralism in the EU Member States*.³² The study, which is produced by the Media Pluralism Monitor, is designed as a diagnostic tool for obtaining a broad understanding of risks to media pluralism. One of the many parts of this tool is the indication of the range of investigative reporting disclosing hidden actions of various political actors – a journalistic genre often applied to the security sector. This, among other indicators in the Monitor, should specify whether there is:

- lack of legal protection for the freedom of speech;
- high ownership concentration or lack of transparency in ownership structures;
- political bias in the media;
- excessive politicisation of media ownership and/or control;
- insufficient representation of certain political topics (for instance, critical assessments of the security sector);
- high centralisation of the national media system; and
- dominance of a limited number of information sources, etc.

Professional media organisations, associations of journalists and international media assistance groups should consider a joint assessment of the Western Balkan mass media situation by applying the Media Pluralism Monitor in a comparative study. This would help formulate more realistic media policies, both in the monitored countries and at the European and international level.

One presently flagrantly unobserved aspect of media policy, that is highly relevant for further democratisation of the mass media in Southeast Europe, is the state of industrial relations in the media sector. A significant but little explored issue in this context is the application of disparate employment standards for journalists in different countries by the same media owners.³³

Industrial relations in the media sector are still mostly under national sovereignty although the media industry cares little about national borders. The legal, economic

³² This study was carried out by a consortium of European academic and consultancy organisations. It is available at http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/media_taskforce/pluralism/index_en.htm.

³³ A typical example, known personally to the author, is the case of a veteran news agency reporter in the Western Balkans. He was declared redundant and forced in 2010 into retirement by his employer from the EU without the same financial package at the end of the carrier as his colleagues in the same company in the EU. The explanation from the headquarters was that different rules apply to the agency staff working outside the EU. The correspondent had covered all the upheavals in the former Yugoslavia since 1992 taking enormous personal risks.

and political conditions for journalistic work are at present mostly not affected by European legislation.³⁴ The level of social protection offered to journalists by the same employer in different countries of the EU differs highly. The discrepancies are even greater in the case of media investments coming from the EU in third countries. Yet, good working conditions and functioning social protections are prerequisites for professional journalism. Few reporters will expose themselves to hazards (such as tackling sensitive issues in the “ministries of power”) if their pay, working conditions and social protection are inadequate.

A huge segment of the media sector in Southeast Europe is now owned by investors who have their business registered in Bermuda, New York, but also in Essen or other business centres in the EU. The work situation of journalists employed by external investors differs much from the working conditions offered by the same companies in their home countries or elsewhere in the EU. Domestic owners see no reason to improve their offer to journalists and other media workers if the external investors, particularly if they come from the EU, are not transferring EU (or in broader terms, Western) social standards to their businesses outside the EU.

Taking into account that transnational market integration is also progressing in the media field, the EU is hesitantly moving towards European transnational regulation – as in the case of the Audiovisual Media Service Directive.³⁵ However, the EU has created energy³⁶ and transport³⁷ communities with candidate countries and potential candidate countries for membership in the EU as part of their progressing participation in the integration process. It would provide a strong impetus for further “Europeanisation”—and democratization—of the mass media in Southeastern Europe, if the EU and countries in the region would also consider creating an information society and media community. If there is no need to wait in the fields of energy and transport until EU membership draws closer for the bulk of the Western Balkan countries in 10 or 15 years, why should the creation of a similar joint space for the mass media be further postponed?

³⁴ One important political exemption is the right to file complaints at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) to ask for remedy in cases dealing with the freedom of speech (Art. 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights). The ECHR can be called only after the national judicial system provides a definite judgement – in practice, many years after the case started.

³⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/reding/ataglance/policies/index_en.htm.

³⁶ http://www.energy-community.org/portal/page/portal/ENC_HOME.

³⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/transport/air/international_aviation/country_index/ecaa_en.htm.