

## **SEEMO: PRESS FREEDOM IN THE WEST BALKANS AND TURKEY**

The Vienna-based South and East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO) covers the regions of South, East and Central Europe.

### **Press Freedom in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Republic of Macedonia / FYROM, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo and Turkey**

In 2010, the number of reported cases of press freedom violations decreased in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Republic of Macedonia / FYROM, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo and Turkey in comparison to previous years. In 2010, SEEMO registered 406 press freedom violations in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Turkey, and Ukraine. These included different forms of threats made by email, letter, telephone, or in person, murders, physical assaults, bomb attacks, detentions and imprisonment, criminal charges, house arrests, political and economic pressures, as well as menacing warnings from religious leaders.

SEEMO has not always reacted publicly to these violations of press freedom: in some cases, journalists on the ground preferred result-oriented quiet diplomacy, rather than public protests. In those cases, SEEMO representatives met with government and political leaders in order to solve specific issues raised by journalists.

While the number of violations is not on the rise, the sources of threats have become increasingly diversified in comparison to previous years. In transition countries, politicians used to be the main source of threats and pressures. This is no longer the case. Nowadays, threats also come from business groups, often linked to mafia-style business dealings, religious organisations, actors, musicians, etc. Pressure by local politicians is particularly pronounced.

In addition, economic issues further complicate journalists' activities: obscure media ownership structures and hidden interests, problems with collective contracts or the lack of any contracts, as well as poor salaries. In some countries, below average salaries are used as a means to exert control over journalists.

### **Media Ownership and Economic Challenges**

Media ownership structure varies from country to country: in some of them, media are owned by local businesses and groups while in others multinational media groups constitute major owners. State-owned print media still exist, contrary to the international standards.

In 2010, the Essen-based Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ) withdrew from Romania and Bulgaria and announced its intention to leave Serbia and other countries in the region. WAZ's withdrawal opens up the media market to new investors. SEEMO fears that local businessmen willing to invest in media might be linked to specific political interests, eager to promote their own media agenda without respecting international press freedom standards.

In many countries, the media market is overcrowded and their economic survival is questionable. As a result, their operating costs are very low, while journalists' salaries and labor conditions are precarious.

The overcrowded media market, especially the overabundance of TV and radio broadcasters, stems from inappropriate regulations and the parallel existence of legal and illegal broadcasters. The latter distort the advertisement market and create an environment of disloyal competition (in Serbia, to give an example, there are several hundred illegal broadcasters).

In addition, companies and advertisers blackmail editors and media owners. The international economic crisis had a direct impact on advertisement expenditures: print media lost between 30 and 50 percent of income while electronic media saw a decrease of income from 20 to 40 percent.

Dire economic conditions for many journalists have multifold consequences: great turnover and little identification with the media they represent; low professional standards; little independent reporting; copy-paste journalism: uncritical reproduction of press releases issued by companies and political parties; absence of investigative journalism, etc.

### **Additional Common Features**

Copyrights are routinely violated.

Self-regulation of print media does not function in most countries, except in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Absence of independent public broadcasting services: political pressure tries to mold public broadcasting according to specific party-oriented interests. Public broadcasters in most countries in the region face big financial problems and are prone to pressures.

Absence of quality newspapers: television is the main source of news for most people . Television viewers in Southeast Europe spend more time in front of TV screens than anybody else in the world, according to studies.

Minority media have been affected by the economic crisis. Most of them are controlled by one minority political party and thus do not reflect the diversity of opinions.

Defamation has only been decriminalised in some countries.

Access to information is not always guaranteed. On paper, most regulations related to access to information meet international standards. In practice, these are not respected.

Last but not least, biased and offensive language has not disappeared. Racism, sexism, homophobia, religious or ethnic intolerance are not officially promoted but are tolerated in the media.

### **Specific trends:**

#### **Albania**

The Albanian media market is overcrowded: there are around 25 daily newspapers. Some have a circulation of one thousand copies.

Political and business groups exert enormous influence on editorial decisions: media are expected to act as mouthpieces of specific interests, publish PR material and abstain from any investigation.

Journalists abstain from investigation in order to avoid pressure.

### **Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Bosnia and Herzegovina is politically and ethnically divided. Most divisions are along ethnic lines. Public broadcasters and privately owned media reflect this situation. There are three public TV channels: one covers the Bosnian Federation, the second addresses Republika Srpska and the third encompasses the whole territory. The Bosnian-Herzegovina public RTV is under constant political pressure from all ethnic groups.

Incitement of ethnic intolerance is present in most media, including public broadcasting.

Internet fora disseminate discriminatory rhetoric and hate speech.

### **Croatia**

In January 2011, SEEMO led a press freedom delegation to Croatia in order to discuss, among other issues, the announced law changes that foresaw criminalising defamation. The outcome was positive: the draft law was withdrawn.

SEEMO applauds the detention of the attackers against Dusan Miljus, investigative reporter with *Jutarnji List*, severely beaten in 2008. However, the mastermind of this attack has not been found. Miljus lives with police protection.

As a result of economic and political pressure, especially in smaller towns, journalists fear reporting on local issues in order to protect their family members.

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### **Republic of Macedonia/Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia**

While political pressure on media is common in the entire region, the Republic of Macedonia / FYROM witnesses selective pressure, that is, media owners are targeted only when they do not support the government.

The case of Television A1 is revealing: its owner Velija Ramokovski was accused of financial irregularities and detained when the broadcaster withdrew its support to the government. Other media owners were not investigated.

Due to unsolved issues with Greece over the name of the country, both Athens and Sofia create problems for Skopje-based reporters. For example, three media outlets from Skopje – television channels, TV Sonce and Kanal 5, as well as the daily *Dnevnik* – were prevented from entering Bulgaria on 17 April 2011.

### **Montenegro**

Media self-regulation does not function and some media outlets lead open wars based on personal intolerance between their owners and editors.

The 2004 murder of Dusko Jovanovic, owner and editor-in-chief of the Podgorica-based daily *Dan*, is still unsolved. The actual executor has been detained, but SEEMO does not consider the case solved: the mastermind behind this murder has not been found.

## **Serbia**

Media developments in Serbia are worrisome. In fact, the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS), the Journalists' Association of Serbia (UNS), the Independent Electronic Media Association (ANEM), the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina and the Local Press sent a joint letter to Serbia's president, Boris Tadic. In the opening statement, the letter states: "This is not the reform that you have promised when coming to power. The situation is utterly alarming; however, the ruling coalition is procrastinating even with the adoption of the Media Development Strategy, despite the firm pledge, made more than a year ago, of its passing in agreement with us and the European Union...We know you are eagerly awaiting the decision from Brussels on the country's candidacy for EU membership, but please note that at this moment Serbia is not offering any satisfactory answers to our questions, let alone European's."

The situation is particularly serious in small towns: local journalists are vulnerable to economic and political pressure. The economic crisis has exacerbated the already fragile economic basis of local media outlets, and municipal financing seems to be the last chance for their survival. In return, journalists are expected not to publish and/or broadcast critical stories.

On the other hand, SEEMO applauds the police decision to have three threatened journalists under 24-hour protection.

Two journalists from B92 Television – editor-in-chief Veran Matic and star investigative reporter Brankica Stankovic – are under permanent protection. Stankovic has revealed several cases of high-level corruption and other forms of crimes in Serbia.

In Loznica, Vladimir Mitric, the local correspondent for *Vecernje Novosti*, was severely beaten by a policeman in 2005. He has been living with around-the-clock police protection ever since. It took five years for the courts to sentence the perpetrator to a six-month jail sentence. The mastermind has never been found. Although the court in Sabac has recently refused to pursue the investigation as to who ordered the beating, the police believe Mitric's life is still under threat and continue to protect him.

The courts, however, have been extremely slow to act upon the perpetrators of attacks on journalists. As a reminder, the masterminds behind the killings of Slavko Curuvija (1999) and Milan Pantic (2001) have not been found; nor has the death of Dada Vujasinovic (1994) been properly investigated. It was initially assumed that Vujasinovic had committed suicide. However, recent evidence appears to indicate that she was murdered.

## **Kosovo**

Kosovo media are particularly vulnerable to threats from local businessmen. Over the past six months, SEEMO was informed about eight such cases.

Due to the unresolved political disagreements between Belgrade and Pristina, Kosovo reporters find numerous legal obstacles when travelling outside of their region. Belgrade does not recognise travel documents issued in Pristina.

## **Turkey**

A report from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) indicates that Turkey is currently holding at least 57 journalists in prison – apparently more than any other country.

The report followed an analysis of more than 70 journalists that the OSCE conducted in conjunction with Erol Önderoğlu, editor-in-chief of the BIANET Independent Communications Network in Istanbul.

The numbers in the report correspond with those given by the Freedom for Journalists Platform – an umbrella group representing local and national media organisations in Turkey.

It is estimated that there are between 700 and 1,000 ongoing proceedings that could result in imprisonment of journalists.

The report found that most of the jailed journalists are imprisoned under articles of Turkey's anti-terror law relating to criminal code provisions on terrorist offences and organisations, or assisting members of or making propaganda in connection with such organisations; or under criminal code prohibitions on establishing, commanding or becoming a member of an armed organisation with the aim of committing certain offences.

Changes of several important legal acts that have influence on media are necessary as many provisions constrain freedom of expression, religion, and association. Access to numerous websites in Turkey is blocked. More about Turkey also on [www.turkeypressfreedom.org](http://www.turkeypressfreedom.org)

More about all SEEMO countries on [www.seemo.org](http://www.seemo.org), [www.hungarypressfreedom.org](http://www.hungarypressfreedom.org) and [www.mediahandbook.org](http://www.mediahandbook.org)