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“Traditional and New Media in South Eastern Europe”

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With this paper I want to give a brief overview of the media situation in South Eastern Europe (SEE), about the structural problems media is facing in this region. The reason for this is that I do believe that through discussing the problems of media in this region, there is something to learn which is not limited to the region, but also interesting and relevant for the general topic of this workshop.

But for realizing this, it is necessary to change the direction of thinking: Usually the countries in SEE are called „countries in transition“. From this perspective the problems in the field of media are a legacy of a totalitarian past, which is not completely stripped off. But if these countries are working hard, if they further improve on their way to EU membership, if the economical situation and standards of democracy are further improving, then these countries will become normal functioning democracies. This is still the main narrative. But what if it is wrong? What if some problems of media in SEE don't have their origins in the past, but are problems that are or could become relevant also for consolidated democracies?

“Politics as continuation of war by other means”

A first questioning of the narrative happened already in the 1990s: when in Yugoslavia together with the introduction of a multi-party system extremely nationalistic parties came to power in all former republics. And media had a key role in spreading hatred. In Serbia for example practically all-important media were under direct control of the Milosevic-Regime. But there were always a few exceptions: The radio broadcaster B92 for example and also some newspapers. Milosevic always knew that he had to leave some media for the weak opposition, media he wouldn't touch directly. And these were able to survive – also because a lot of money from the West was given. So we had government media, but also (weak) opposition media in a highly polarized political culture.

How is the situation today? For most countries of SEE we still can talk about a strong block of media close to the government on one side and weak opposition media on the other side. And politics is still very polarized, to such an extend that one could misquote Carl von Clausewitz and say: „Politics is merely the continuation of war by other means.“ And still, like in war, truth is the first victim.

Just to give one example: There is a popular political debate show on B92, and lately the TV station decided to move the show from its national-wide program to its less popular satellite

info channel. In Serbia this has raised a storm among journalists and media observers. “How is it possible that something that Milosevic didn’t do – something that no one ever thought to do – he has done now?” Olja Beckovic, the show’s author and host, asked, clearly blaming Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic for the death of her 24-year-old TV programme. This accusation is shared by practically every critical intellectual and also the opposition media in the country.

So we have strong accusations, and there is no doubt that the situation of media in Serbia is worsening. But especially in this case the problem is: There's no real evidence that the removal of the debate show is politically motivated. The broadcaster B92 which is today owned by a Greek media company has justified its decision on the grounds of pure commercial interests: The main program should become an entertain program, while the popular debate show should strengthen and popularize their weak info channel. So is it actually the decision of a private media company to profile their TV programs? Or is it really another serious example of political pressure on media – what is of course possible.

And this uncertainty, what is true and not, is of course not only a problem for me as a foreign correspondent, but also the problem of each individual citizen. Because in highly polarized political cultures there is practically no space between the fronts: media that is perceived as unbiased, only serving the public, trying to understand a conflict and therefore playing a role in enlightenment. In polarized political cultures media is not only reproducing conflicts, but also – as instruments – do have a key role in provoking conflicts. And if there’s a scandal – and there are always scandals in polarized cultures – the first question of many people is not about truth, but: In who’s interest is this story?

Media under influence of political and business elites

It was therefore obviously a mistake to assume that once the media was liberated from state influence, the problem of media freedom would be solved automatically. And it was also a mistake to believe that the way to EU membership (or EU membership itself) is a guarantee for progress also in the field of media. On the contrary, there is obviously no correspondence between EU accession and progress in freedom of speech. According to Reporters without Border's press freedom index Bulgaria dropped since its EU accession in 2007 from the 35th place to the 100th. More than ever the Bulgarian media market is owned and controlled by the political and economic elite. And Brussels is further closing the eyes. As in Serbia: EU bureaucrats are pretty much excited about the current Serbian government under Prime minister Aleksandar Vucic, no matter if at the same time the situation for media is worsening and worsening. As long as Vucic „delivers“ and is cooperative in the Kosovo question, he can do pretty much what he wants in other fields.

Of course, if you have a look at an ordinary kiosk in Belgrade, Sarajevo or Sofia, the huge number of newspapers and magazines is surprising. But this is not an expression of a real and substantial pluralism. Almost none of these media outlets are able to survive on the market without external help. And external help means: It is generally known that especially newspapers are under the influence of business and political elites. Either media owners are themselves members of these circles who are following their own personal interests with their newspapers through influencing public opinion. Or it's more indirect: Media owners and/or editors enter into close relations with political and business elites, who usually give them money through advertising. On the other hand, independent media that are critical of the political and economic elites do not get advertisements or do not get government grants. For many it's therefore simply a question of survival being close to powerful circles.

Low trust in traditional media

To summarise: What we can see looking at the so called transition countries is what is happening if – esp. newspapers – don't have a solid fundament of financing: they are becoming part of the political game. And the „critical“ media is no exception. All together this is leading to a situation in which media limits its ability to inform the public on relevant topics.

And this fact, that the media is rather serving the interest of political parties and various economic groups (and the fact that everybody knows that), is reflected already in a very low trust media is enjoying in these societies. In Bulgaria a survey of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation found out that 60% don't believe that media is free in Bulgaria. Only 14% explicitly believe that media is independent. The lowest trust is among citizens in the capital Sofia: Only 7% of the surveyed think that media is fully or at least merely independent. But what this survey also has shown: Especially younger people have much greater trust in Blogs, alternative online media and news from social networks than in traditional media.

Blogs and social networks as a new tool for information

So this is something we can see in this region too: The more the general media situation is worsening, the more important online alternatives become important – not only for entertaining, but as an important source of information – and this especially in times of a political crisis. The anti-government protests in Bulgaria for example were accompanied by a real explosion in the number of blogs and an increasing importance of social media as an alternative source of information from the traditional ones. All together they have created a new channel of information, that allowed users to discuss among themselves what is happening in society.

But of course, it is in most of the cases not journalism what we see in the field of social networks, blogs and portals. It is the speech of activists. They can fill an important gap in the public sphere, especially when freedom of speech is threatened. However, the effects of this activity have for the most part remained limited to the internet itself, without influencing in any decisive way the rest of society in its full complexity – with few exceptions of course. And in these cases we can see strong reactions by governments. Like in Serbia, where web portals were attacked after a story of the allegedly plagiarized PhD thesis of the Serbian Minister of Internal Affairs, Nebojša Stefanović, was published. During the floods that hit Serbia in May 2014 three bloggers were detained for 'inciting panic during a state of emergency' via social media. Critical Websites, blogs and portals were at times removed from the internet.

Conclusions

What conclusions could be drawn for civic education? Like always, the rise of new media brings as well dangers as opportunities. Civic education cannot or shouldn't be any more concentrated only on the recipient's side, although this is still important, especially now when sources of information become practically endless. In order not to be drowning in the flood of information, it requires more than ever informed and responsible citizens who are able to process and assess the information that is available and relevant for them.

But what is really new at the current situation is precisely this: With the new forms of digital media consumers can become – and are becoming – more and more media producers. Here the sharp line between journalists and citizens is becoming blurry. It's no exaggeration to see parts of the blogosphere as a kind of journalism that is already playing an important role for political communication. On the other hand, also professional journalists for various reasons have to look for alternatives to their fixed employment. And of course, also for them the Internet is the natural field to engage.

This is where their demands meet: Both very often lack knowledge of how to realize their projects. For journalists for example the transfer of knowledge about specific skills of online journalism, successful paid-content strategies and business models would be useful, as well as it is for citizen journalists to be trained in basic journalistic skills. And citizens could be encouraged to become citizen journalists. In this regard media education will receive a whole new meaning.