

Nature/Environment and Journalism: Thoughts about journalistic role perceptions and political framework conditions

Maren Köster-Hetzendorf, Southeast Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO), Vienna

The media landscape in Southeast Europe varies. Figuratively speaking we find landscapes with green meadows, dark and dangerous swamps and even deserts. On our journey through this media landscape we will make three stops. First we stop in Bulgaria where we find an educational approach. Our next stop will be in the countries of former Yugoslavia where we look upon the investigative journalism. Our last stop will be in Hungary where journalism is fighting for survival.

Educational approach of Journalism in Bulgaria.

Journalism in Bulgaria has developed a lot since the country joined the European Union (EU) in 2007. The professional level of journalism of the so called quality media there is relatively high and to a good degree streamlining with the Western European journalism: informative and unemotional.

In Bulgaria we find a wide range of private and state media side by side.

Netnews are becoming more and more important for opinion forming.

It stands out that the state media show sort of an educational approach. This is obviously matched with the requirements of the EU. It means to give the Bulgarian civil society a stronghold in the European Community (EU).

In this context fits the weekly news show “Referendum” of the state television station BNT1. “Referendum” started in 2013. More information see here:

[.https://www.bnt.bg/bg/s/issue/referendum-s-dobrina-cheshmedzhieva.](https://www.bnt.bg/bg/s/issue/referendum-s-dobrina-cheshmedzhieva)

Viewers give their vote at the beginning and at the end of the show concerning a topic which is currently being discussed in the public. Among those are political, economic, social and ecological topics.

This year up to July five controversial eco-topics have been discussed: culling to prevent the spread of animal diseases, noise protection, the moratorium for the construction of the nuclear power plant Belene, food production standards and air pollution.

In “Referendum” facts are in front. Experts, investors and stakeholders give their arguments to the audience pro and contra. One participant explains the position auf the EU.

The program meets obviously the interests of the government – to know what moves the people. And as well the program meets the needs of the people to be informed about topics of their interest. So it is a win win situation for both sides.

Of course as everywhere in Bulgaria a lot is going on behind the media curtain. Interests of business and politics decide as well as viewing figures and ad sales what content and design a program has and more over how long it runs in the media. This have state and private media in common.

As many other papers and sites “Dnevnik” www.dnevnik.bg , a daily newspaper and “Capital” www.capital.bg , a weekly one, have eco-pages: The papers are among the most reliable media in Bulgaria.

Both belong to Economedia <https://www.economedia.bg> the biggest publisher of business media in Bulgaria. Former owner was the German Holtzbrinck-Verlagsgruppe. Its involvement in the Balkan states in the early years after the regime change was not undisputed. The private owned group of today says on its homepage: “We aim for profit, while keeping in mind the special nature of the publishing business and its responsibility towards society. We believe that only independent media can create quality content.”

While print editions continuously shrink internet sites, platforms and social media become more influential for the opinion forming of the educated Digital-Generation.

The existence of state and private media side by side ensures that topics come to the public from all sides illuminated: As for several years the enlargement of the winter sport area in the UNESCO protected pirin montains has been discussed. Thanks to the media the lobbies and the economic interests behind

the project have been discovered, defended and criticized. And the government had to refer position

https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2017/03/10/2932238_p_lanina_v_mugla/

https://www.dnevnik.bg/video/2018/01/18/3114508_video_100_vuprosa_za_pirin_do_boiko_borisov/

Finally I would say: In the colorful Bulgarian media world you can find any information as well explosive information but never stop your research at one media or one site.

Establishing of investigative Journalism in South East Europe.

The complex political, economic and social circumstances seem to favor investigative journalism in the region.

The “Balkan Investigative Reporting Network” (BIRN) <http://birn.eu.com/> has helped a lot establishing this special type of journalism. BIRN has been founded in 2004. It is a network of local NGOs promoting freedom of speech, human rights and democratic values.

BIRN has presence across South East Europe with country based organisations in Albania, BIH, Kosovo, Macedonia, Romania and Serbia. Journalists work for BIRN in Montenegro, Croatia, Bulgaria and Greece. The media presence is wide – online, in print, on TV and on radio. Its flagship website www.BalkanInsight.com is published in 15 languages and read in over 200 countries worldwide.

The list with the donors is long and impressive: It includes the EU Commission, Embassies, Development Organisations from all over Europe, Foundations as the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung from all over the world.

The network is coordinated by the umbrella organisation “BIRN Hub” <http://birn.eu.com/network/birn-hub> registered in Bosnia. The Hub does the fundraising, provides member organisations with trainers, editors and a website platform. In Sarajevo they pool the specialized journalists to produce quality in the coverage of issues.

Olsi Nika from the “Center for Protection of Natural Ecosystems in Albania” gave us here an example of good cooperation between his NGO and Birn. Confronted with low interest of Albanian journalists and public in eco-issues he invited journalists of important foreign journals like “Der Spiegel”. This worked. The stories about hydropower had a follow-up in Albania: Birn tackled the topic. “Since then our issues have a good media coverage”, says Nika.

We have learned by Nika and Emirjeta Adhami from the Tirana based “Institute for Nature Conservation in Albania” that in Albania the eco-journalism is being boosted by NGOs. But information should never run one way. Institutions and authorities as the producers of news are as well in demand as the media.

Apart from Birn there are further more institutes and agencies which stand for investigative journalism in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. I point out three more. From the beginning on they stand of good quality and enjoy internationally a decent reputation and are considered a reputable source of information:

“The Center for Investigative Reporting” (CIN) <https://www.cin.ba> has been founded in 2004 in Sarajevo. It was the first organization of this kind to be established in the Balkans.

CIN was started with a USAID grant and technical assistance from the New York University School of Journalism. Till today you notice not only here the American handwriting in the investigative journalistic style.

CIN publishes stories on major web portals in the region and worldwide. CIN-stories have been taken over already in “Washington Post” and “Der Spiegel”, and some were to be seen in “ZDF”, “BBC” and “Deutsche Welle”.

The “Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia” (CINS)

www.cins.rs/english was founded by the Independent Journalists Association of Serbia. Funded by many small private donations the aim is to avoid any influence of business and politics. CINS trains journalists and editors in Serbia in skills of investigative journalism.

The “Mediacentar Sarajevo (MC)” www.media.ba/bs is a school for journalists and a news agency. The Mediacentar has according to its own words already organized more than 230 training programs in journalism and media education attended by more than 2,000 people from Bosnia and Hercegovina and the region. The institution has got financial support by the European Commission, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE),

the Central European Initiative (CEI), the British Embassy in Sarajevo, the International Research & Exchange Board (IREX) and others.

No question environmental topics are not in the focus of these agencies and training centers.

But the issue steps out of the shadows. So the Mediacentar last year organized a six-day-training for journalists dealing with environmental issues. 32 journalists and students from the Western Balkan countries took part.

International experts introduced the European standards and helped with practical work. The workshop was funded by the Embassy of the Netherlands in Serbia.

Researching eco-stories are often anything but not harmless because the investigative journalist interferes in many interests.

In 2006 the Serbian Journalist Djordje S. Padejski got great recognition when the Association of Journalists of Serbia awarded him for his story on massive illegal bird slaughter in the autonomous Serbian province Vojvodina. Padejski had been a participant of the first Mediacenter-workshop. Under partly dangerous circumstances he had documented that behind the ecological crime is a criminal ring which makes annually five million Euros profit.

Of course not only researching but as well publishing of explosive stories is difficult.

The work of the investigative journalist interferes with the interest of business and politics which control the media. The only way out find journalists often via the above mentioned platforms and agencies. And this is great because there is no shortage of eco-topics in the Western Balkans.

Independent journalism fighting for survival in Hungary.

An independent journalistic perception auf social, political, economic and eco-topics is in Hungary at the moment not possible. On September the 12th the EU parliament brought a rule of law process on the way against the Hungarian Government. One reason among others was the dealing with freedom of the press. www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/eu-parlament-ungarn-rechtsstaatsverfahren (Europäisches Parlament fordert Rechtsstaatsverfahren gegen Ungarn 12.9. 2018)

In 1999 Viktor Orbán first has been elected Prime Minister. Since then dismissals of editors or whole editorial offices are not unusual. Formally there is no censorship. But it happens that private independent media are bought by strawmen of people who are close with Orbán. Others had from one moment to the other no advertising revenues anymore and were closed down because of unprofitability. This happened for instance 2016 with “Nepczabadság”, the biggest oppositional daily newspaper.

Meanwhile also conservative media are affected by strawman acquisitions or/and closing. Recently the editor in chief and all the editors of the conservative magazine “Szabadvegt” were fired although the paper had been loyal to the government.

The German newspaper “Die Welt” speculated that it had something to do with an article of the known economist Peter Ákos Bod. The trade Minister of the former left-conservative Government of Prime Minister József Antall had obviously gone too far.

Bod has written about economic systems which actors aim at their own share when awarding state contracts. He has played in the hands of the opposition. The opposition complains that exact this has led to a loyal and well supplied oligarchy in Hungary. <https://www.welt.de/politik/> (Warum Orbán plötzlich gegen das eigene Lager kämpft, Boris Kálnoky, 27.9.2018).

Critical journalism finds a way out via internet. The site www.magyararancs.hu stands for a good journalism, but because of small money it is published only in Hungarian. Therefore the target groups are limited to Hungary. A fate that many sites in the Balkans share which are based on private funding from the readers and which have not the financial support of international donors.

Another way out of the difficult situation offered for some time small private funded media like the “Pester Lloyd” www.pesterlojd.net. It is a traditional daily newspaper located in the Hungarian town Budakalász near Budapest. The paper is published since 1854 – in German. As nowadays not many people in Hungary speak German you can imagine the circulation is low and so the social meaning.

Till 2015 the paper wrote in a loud critical manner about emissions trading and the reducing of the nature reserves as a profitable business field “for dubious networks”.

In 2015 the paper tackled also the enlargement of the nuclear power plant Pak. Since then there have been no more eco-stories. Only the category “energy and environment” still exists till today.

This abrupt standstill seems to me a good example for the situation in Hungary as it is.

Conclusion

Work is not easy for eco-journalists in SOE. Interests of business and politics, narrow information channels and low attention of the public hamper very often the journalistic work. But nevertheless eco-journalism becomes more and more self-confident. Specialized schools train journalists in investigative journalism and reach a good level of quality. Internationally highly respected internet platforms and agencies ensure that the eco-stories find their readers, listeners and viewers at home and in abroad.