

Welcome address

New approaches for higher media diversity

Christian Spahr, Director Media Program South East Europe, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

Dear colleagues, partners and friends,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to welcome you here today at the invitation of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Our Media Program South East Europe is supporting quality journalism and media diversity in ten countries. Today's event is organised in cooperation with the "Article 10 ECHR Task Force" at the University of Frankfurt (Oder) in Germany. This expert group, led by Professor Johannes Weberling, is inspired by the ideas of the European Convention for Human Rights. Its members are currently gathering in Sofia in order to identify best practices of new media outlets.

In Bulgaria and most other countries of the region, we have a contradictory situation in the media sector: On the one hand, free reporting is legally guaranteed and critical journalists are not being imprisoned. On the other hand, ratings in international press freedom rankings are not satisfactory – Bulgaria is ranked in 113th place out of 180 countries, according to "Reporters Without Borders". This is partly due to a strong proximity of media, politics and business, but also due to the profile of many media owners: They are not just journalistic entrepreneurs, but use media ownership in order to have political and business influence. The trust of citizens in media is very low. According to a representative KAS survey published last year, only 12 percent of Bulgarians believe in the independence of media. The connection between journalism, other industries and political power is an important reason for this.

Therefore, all over South East Europe, independent media projects are emerging: News portals, research pools, and multimedia platforms. Very often, they are independent from traditional media houses and tycoons. In some cases, funding comes from international organisations, but crowdfunding on the internet is also an option. Their journalistic products are being financed in other ways than traditional advertising or kiosk sales, and offered for free to citizens who look for alternative information. Especially independent investigative journalism can help to create more transparency in politics, economy and society. We need such new approaches for higher media diversity.

Today, we would like to discuss how these projects can be successful. In terms of funding, but also management, legal basis, professional mission and internal standards. We will bring together ideas from Bulgaria, the region, and Germany. In a media law conference in Frankfurt (Oder) in January, we discussed whether the legal concept of a cooperative can help to create new media outlets. The original idea of a cooperative is to be an autonomous association of people to meet their common needs. This idea was misinterpreted during communism, when cooperatives were imposed by the state. But the idea of independent cooperatives is much older and has Christian and liberal roots, as Professor Weberling will explain in his keynote.

What the spirit of cooperatives has to do with the Web 2.0 economy and the wisdom of the crowd will be the topic of our panel discussion. We will hear practical experiences of journalists and NGO representatives from Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Romania. I will introduce Miranda Patručić, Ruslan Trad and Gelu Trandafir in detail at the beginning of the debate. You all are most welcome to join the Q&A session and stay for a coffee afterwards.

But first of all, I would like to invite my colleague Thorsten Geissler to welcome you on behalf of the KAS Bulgaria office. We have already worked together on topics of media law when he was the head of the KAS Rule of Law Program South East Europe. Thank you for co-hosting this panel, Thorsten, and thank you all for your attention.