

Hendrik Sittig: „To have quality journalism, you should want it“

НАЧАЛО | ИНТЕРВЮТА

Хендрик Зитих: За да имаш качествена журналистика, трябва да я поискаш

Симона Костадинова | 08:10 | 05 март 2020 | [10 коментара](#)

Свободата на медиите е един от най-важните елементи на демокрацията, а в България ситуацията е тежка и се наблюдава симбиоза между политика и медиите. Това казва в интервю за *Mediapool* директорът на Медийната програма за Югоизточна Европа на фондация "Конрад Аденауер" Хендрик Зитих. По думите му всеки журналист трябва да осъзнава ролята, която има в обществото, но освен това и самото общество трябва да има съзнание за това, че медиите трябва да са свободни. Това важи и за политиците, които, за съжаление, говорят с презрение и неуважение за журналистите, посочва той.



Хендрик Зитих

Interview with Hendrik Sittig, Head of the Media Programme South East Europe of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung for the Bulgarian news portal „Mediapool.bg“, published on 5th of March 2020. Link to the original news in Bulgarian <https://bit.ly/2lIVcS9>

Mediapool: Bulgaria is at the bottom of the Press Freedom Index of “Reporters Without Borders” (RWB) within the EU member states. An inefficient judicial system and corruption have been identified as the main obstacles to freedom of expression. Control over the media by oligarchs and politicians is also a major problem and the media concentration by the businessman and the DPS MP Delyan Peevski is seen as an example for the market monopolisation. How do you see this situation?

HS: From the perspective of my experience and the German media system the media situation in Bulgaria is difficult. You know about the 111th place, the last in the ranking among the EU countries. This situation has not even improved, but worsened in recent years and is indeed a very sad situation for an EU Member State. Unfortunately, Bulgaria is not an isolated case. The situation is similar in all countries in South East Europe. In my opinion, every democratic institution in Bulgaria should have the interest and motivation to improve its score in the ranking. I think every democrat should be aware that media freedom is one of the most important elements of any democracy. The aim of our Media Programme is to help the work of journalists and the media. We are glad to support media freedom.

Mediapool: In a few weeks, the deadline set by the Bulgarian parliament for the Bulgarian government to draw a "plan for the media development" will expire. In your opinion, is it possible that such a problem-solving tactic will work well?

HS: This is at least a signal and a glimmer of hope. Because, apparently, the difficult situation of the media in Bulgaria is also perceived as a problem in the political circles. The media landscape cannot be observed separately from the society. And that's why the situation in other South East European countries is similar, because they are all going through a long process of transformation from a communist system to a democracy. The issue with the press is a challenge for the whole society because the awareness for the need of free media must be raised. However, I am skeptical when there is a symbiosis between politics and media. However, one has to see that politicians determine the orientation of the society as a whole. So it would be good, when the political circles develop serious motivation to stand up for media freedom.

Mediapool: So you see a symbiosis between politics and media in Bulgaria?

HS: Yes, unfortunately. This is a fundamental problem in the whole region of South East Europe. Our Media Programme monitors the situation in ten countries in total. This mixture of media, oligarchs and politics makes the media situation really difficult. In principle, investments in the media are of course necessary. However, investors should be aware that the media must be free. A good example of this is Jeff Bezos, the owner of "Amazon", who bought the "Washington Post". He invests in the established newspaper, that is rich in tradition, and gives journalists freedom. This model is good because print media in particular experience economic and financial difficulties worldwide.

Mediapool: What is the situation of the public service media, especially in the countries where you see a symbiosis between politics and media?

HS: This is a special case. I am a big advocate of public service broadcasting. I have worked for such broadcasters in Germany for 15 years. Public service media channels, as I know them from Germany, are an important part of democracy - if they can work independently and are well financed.

Mediapool: There has been great turmoil in the public service media in recent years. Bulgarian National Television (BNT) is practically bankrupt and its director is proposing changes to the law so that television can get more money from the state while it foregoes commercial advertising. The same applies to the Bulgarian National Radio (BNR). In your opinion, is this the right approach to stabilising the public service media?

HS: There is an ongoing discussion about the funding of public service media across Europe, including Germany as well. In my opinion, completely independent broadcasters can only exist through the licence fee model. Only in this case public service broadcasters can be the spokesperson of those who pay the fees. However, everyone needs to understand that independent public service broadcasting is important for the society as a whole. Last year we conducted a survey across South East Europe. Two thirds of the respondents indicated that public service media is an important part of the democratic society; in Bulgaria, 80 percent thought so. At the same time, however, the licence fee model received the least approval in the survey. Few people are willing to pay for this model. However, if we want to have free and well-funded public service media, we also need to find a way how to achieve this. Public service media should be a source of objective, serious and credible information, especially amidst false news. If the licence fee model is not enforceable, another model should be found. In principle,

there is nothing wrong with the funding of public service media through the state budget. There are countries in Europe where this is the case. If this model is chosen, however, the law must stipulate that the funding is constant and should not change every year. It must also be ensured by law that no politician is allowed to influence the media.

Another risk of political influence lies in the choice of supervisory bodies, which are mostly determined by the political circles. Here I would like to refer to the German model. We also have broadcasting councils that elect the directors general and set the budgets, but do not exercise any control, either directly or indirectly, over the content of reporting. In Germany, these councils are practically a mirror of the society. Depending on the broadcaster, they have more than 30 members who are nominated and selected by important social groups.

Mediapool: How are these groups defined?

HS: There are media laws in which they are defined. These groups also include parties, but a few years ago it was stipulated by law that they may only occupy a maximum of 30 percent of the broadcasting council. Other organisations are, for example, trade unions, youth organisations, sports and environmental organisations, the churches, organisations for people with disabilities, etc. All of them independently choose their own representatives. Due to this broad composition, no political influence can be exerted, as we unfortunately often observe here.

Mediapool: BNR was hit by a scandal last year – an independent journalist with many years of experience was suspended and the programme "Horizont" was stopped. Journalists witnessed pressure by the Director-General at the time. Despite the sharp reaction from international organisations and the Media Programme of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung as well, the BNR crisis has not triggered a serious political debate on media freedom. In your opinion why?

HS: We followed the scandal. In my view, it was a bizarre situation. And, at least as far as I am informed, it became clear for the first time how pressure is exerted from outside. In fact, unfortunately, this did not trigger a sustainable debate, but I have seen some positive things. For example, the solidarity of BNR journalists with each other or the numerous demonstrators in front of the BNR building who showed their support. For me as a former journalist, BNR is one of the few beacons of real press freedom in Bulgaria. I wish the new Director-General a lot of luck so that this freedom remains preserved. But, of course, I would be very glad if there is a public discussion about the media freedom, which could raise awareness about this issue.

Mediapool: How do you think the independence of the media can be guaranteed?

HS: This is a huge topic. First of all, there should be public awareness that the media must be free. This attitude should also be anchored in political circles. Unfortunately, we are experiencing more and more worldwide the problem that politicians talk about journalists with contempt and disrespect. This creates an atmosphere in which trust in journalists and their work decreases. Unfortunately, we are currently also observing this in old democratic countries such as USA. In addition, there is the use of social media, which intensifies the toxic atmosphere considerably. How can this be changed? We should develop awareness among politicians, but also among journalists, that quality journalism is necessary. Because journalism is a serious handcraft that must be learned. Every journalist should be aware of his role in society. In Germany there is a motto that is said to every young journalist: "The journalist reports what is the situation." Part of this objective reflection is asking questions and checking everyone's opinion, in order for readers, listeners or viewers to form their own opinion. Another problem across South East Europe are the difficult conditions in which journalists work. I mean low salaries and sometimes precarious employment contracts. Journalists perform important tasks and must be paid accordingly. Nevertheless, I am of

course aware that many media outlets have financial difficulties and not enough resources.

Mediapool: You mentioned that politicians disdain journalists. What does the fact show that politicians in Bulgaria dare to speak to journalists with words like "turkey"?

HS: I can only counter this with an appeal to the democratic forces to become aware of what the elements of a democratic society are and how important democracy is. The task of creating a free media landscape is a task for everyone. Part of it is the journalism training. Journalists must be well trained. As a Media Programme, we are working on this and we have, amongst others, a cooperation with the Sofia University. Twice a year, in spring and autumn, we invite leading German journalists to share their journalistic experiences with the students.



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