**Central regional conference of the SEE Media Observatory:**

“Media and journalism in South East Europe –

Captured by particular interests or turning to serve the public?”

**Tirana, 12-13 June 2014**

**Session 6:**

**External view and context: are media integrity problems a regional or wider problem?**

Presentation by speaker:

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I need to start with an apology. Sorry I could not be with you for the first half of your conference but we had our annual general meeting in Brussels. Our AGM wasn’t completely unrelated to what you are speaking about though – one unwelcome addition to our agenda was the proposal from the Hungarian government for a new 40% tax on media revenues. We are issuing a statement today condemning this proposal, a statement which has the strong backing of media groups from across Europe. This is not on purely altruistic grounds – an increase in one’s competitors’ tax bills might not normally be the cause of much anguish in company boardrooms – but also because bad ideas travel fast in today’s Europe.

This is indeed part of a wider trend in which government pressure on media companies is increasing and is becoming increasingly sophisticated. I was asked to speak about whether the situation in the Western Balkans is unique to this region or whether it’s part of a wider trend. In the finest traditions of the city of Brussels, my answer is ‘well, it depends’.

Yes, governments pressurise media businesses everywhere. Not just in the Western Balkans but in long-established democracies. It is fair to say that some governments in the Balkans have been imaginative in the means by which they pressurise broadcasters – tax investigations into opposition media outlets timed suspiciously close to elections, defamation cases and even, here in Tirana, using town planning to threaten an independent media group with the loss of its studio premises. The one thing we can say is that these tactics are marginal improvements on the old ways of intimidation and violence. In fact, as broadcasters, we can almost take a perverse pride in the daily calls from the spin doctors of the government and opposition – if we weren’t so good at doing our job, if television wasn’t simultaneously the most pervasive and most trusted channel by which citizens get their national and international news, then the politicians wouldn’t bother us. Maybe the day the spin doctors stop calling is the time we need to worry about the future of television. But we can only afford to be a little bit blasé about this if we are part of a wider, functioning media market. Governments are, by definition, powerful, backed by the full apparatus of the state. To stand up to moves such as the latest scheme from Budapest, European media players need to have a certain scale and level of resource. And if one has powerful media owners squaring off against the forces of the state, then one needs a strong referee, in an independent and authoritative regulator (at least for the broadcast sector, I accept that print media have a different tradition here and don’t wish to comment on their arrangements).

Today, when I make my sadly too infrequent visits to your region, too many of your markets appear to have neither a strong media sector nor a strong regulator. There are exceptions – the Bosnian regulator has an excellent reputation in European media policy circles – but even these exceptions may be coming under threat. And I read in your very thorough paper that the Bosnian TV advertising market was worth $45m last year, divided among 44 players. Clearly, you can’t run an effective TV station on $1m per year – just to put in context the gulf between some local operators and the European market, many European players, public or commercial, will spend €1m per hour on some genres of content, not least the FIFA World Cup which is front of mind for so many of us at the moment. To be blunt, and to express a view which may be unfashionable in front of an audience of academics and media pluralism advocates, this region is suffering from an excess of pluralism and needs a healthy dose of media concentration. Far better to have two or three professionally-run channels who can invest in decent content (including journalism) and demand prices from advertisers which reflect that investment than twenty or thirty channels who cannot do so. While Western European media groups are frequently blamed for all sorts of social ills, real or imaginary, one thing we have not been accused of is failing to pay salaries on time.

Turning now to the recommendations in your report, my first remark would be there are way too many of them. There’s an old saying that ‘if you have more than three priorities, you haven’t got any real priorities’. I counted 26 recommendations for Serbia alone, and I heard that there are 64 in total. Mind you, the European Commission is worse with, from memory, 168 indicators in the Media Pluralism Monitor. I would also recommend an element of ‘picking your battles carefully’.

For example, I read in the Bosnian report that one “problem” is advertising spend migrating to channels in Croatia and elsewhere. I’m afraid that’s something you will have to live with – as the region approaches European standards, whether by acceding to the Council of Europe Convention or by taking on the acquis communautaire, so you will become part of a much bigger single market. Rather than seek to protect your local player, why not study how other smaller markets with common languages have adapted – visit Austria, Flanders or Ireland and talk to local channels there. It’s also the way the market is going … with global internet companies eyeing up TV advertising revenues and launching global online advertising platforms, there is little point worrying about your advertising spend moving from Sarajevo to Zagreb when, in a few years, it could be in Mountain View or Palo Alto.

To finish on a more optimistic note, there is a recurrent issue in the reports of non-transparent advertising spend by the state and its agencies. Someone earlier advocated a ban on government advertising which I don’t think would be workable, or possibly even constitutional. But there must be room for development of guidelines to ensure that government advertising is allocated only on one criterion, namely effective use of what is, after all, taxpayers’ money. On this issue, you’re not alone. I’ve heard from people in many Western European markets who have suspicions about the motivations behind the use of government advertising budgets. And what you have in this report, which I haven’t seen elsewhere, is actual hard data to back up the suspicions. So here at least, we have identified an issue which far from being exclusive to your region, is actually one where you can lead the way in pushing for more transparency.

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