

Drago Pilsel

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN THE REGIONAL CO-OPERATION

The Role of the media in the Regional Co-operation in SEE is one of the crucial aspects of the Stability Pact for South East Europe, especially in the Democratisation and Human Rights Task Force. Without democratic institutions that work effectively and the democratic development of a state under the rule of law there can be no long-term economic development and prosperity. Equally, democratisation and non-discrimination are also fundamental preconditions for guaranteeing internal and external security. Democracy and Human Rights: Deep-rooted democratic habits and a vibrant civil society constitute the foundation upon which the achievement of the objectives of the Pact can be built.

Since June 2001, Regional Table, Working Table I, focuses on four priority areas: inter-ethnic dialogue and cross-border co-operation, refugee matters, the media, and education and youth. The Media Task Force - a collaborative effort of donors, NGOs and recipient countries - adopted the Charter for Media Freedom and a Strategy for Media Assistance. It also set up National Working Groups in seven SEE countries, which are comprised of media professionals, members of civil society, and representatives of state authorities. Areas of support cover legislation, training, public broadcasting and networks of private outlets or associations.

Certainly, to this moment, many good projects were founded under the umbrella of the Stability Pact. The best project, the best meeting about the role of the Media in the Regional Co-operation in the frame created by the Stability Pact in last year, was the First University of Communications of Southeast Europe organised by the Media plan institute in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, from the 18th to the 20th of October 2001.

As the president of Forum 21, Association of Broadcast Journalists of the Croatian Journalist Society in Zagreb, I was moderator of the round table 'Media against Hatreds: Media and Peace-Building in Southeast Europe'. A broad spectrum of issues – as many as 40 topics – underlined the justifiability of the term "University". Around 570 men and women of various profiles, professional, scientific, educational, cultural, social, political and other backgrounds took part in, or "attended", the University. That was quite a big number. However, it was not only the quantity that was easily noticeable. The quality overwhelmed the quantity. I can say that the quality was irresistible.

In addition to a perfect organisation, the selection of topics was right on target. The organisers made a proper choice of the topical and challenging issues. These were some of the topics: EU policy toward South East Europe; the media and terrorism; the Internet and journalistic ethics; education of journalists; regulatory agencies and their independence; challenges of Internet regulations; thinking digitally; media and regional co-operation; speech of hatred; information gap; freedom of information; and many others.

This is a sufficient proof that it is necessary to acknowledge the specific features of the region, which went through conflicts and crises, while fears from a historical relapse are still widespread. A recurring theme in the keynote of many panelists was the following: "We do not want to be the backyard of Europe". For example, the information gap remains the beginning and the end of the story. One colleague from Serbia said that less than five percent of the Serbian population had access to the Internet. The situation is even worse in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most experts believe that at best not more than two percent of the local population have access to the Internet. The role of the Stability Pact should be stressed in particular in terms of its more vigorous and dynamic engagement in media co-operation in the region and in the development of the communication sector.

There is a constant struggle for financial survival and a great need for skills training in the basic tenets of fact-based journalism – how to produce fair, balanced and well-documented stories. On the positive

side, the media in this region of Europe have a unique opportunity to recreate themselves and launch a new era of free expression in a land once dominated by dictators and nationalists who used professional communications as a tool of war.

In a recent report I predicted that it would take at least one generation to move beyond the roots of communism and the stranglehold that authoritarianism had on the media. I believe the most important part of the process is to educate the region's young journalists and encourage greater professionalism and fresh approaches to newsgathering. Democracy should be carefully built day by day and journalists should become promoters of pluralism, liberty and progress. Without that, we will not have real freedom for a long time in South Eastern Europe.

The Information society is changing our reality in the field of communication, politics, trade and traffic – in short, in all fields – through the media and electronic networks. The acceptance of diversity, differences and tactic divergences do not prevent us from our joint thinking about the future. Therefore, if the information society is international, if local realities are deeply rooted in history and culture, strategies may only be regional. It is precisely at that level that South East Europe is the area suitable for the most tranquil life in the oncoming century.

The Stability Pact may work and help initiatives of education, exchange of information and interactivity in the region if the Pact really wants to belong to reality. But it is necessary to explain, act pedagogically and multiply opportunities for information so that those who are unfamiliar with projects of regional co-operation, or those who are skeptic or critical, get interested and attentive, even induced.

I can suggest that the Pact officers should do an intelligent job of lobbying immediately. The difficulties should not be understated. One should not be naive. Nevertheless, the project of media regional co-operation is rich and facilitates progress and integration in Europe are step by step more credible.

Politically, the vision of the future of the developed media in civil society is generous. Strategically, its implementation should be shared between market and public service. Everyone should take a chance.

It has been mentioned that the South East European region is seen as the European backyard, an exotic and since most recently, a dangerous area within which guests feel well at peace and risk their lives in turbulent times. It is high time that we change that international focus. This is why I am happy and honoured to participate in this seminar in Reichenau.

As Dr. Martin Luther King said in 1963, in the historical March on Washington address', I also have a dream. I will explain it. In a sense we have come to this meeting to cash a check. When the architects of the European Union wrote the magnificent words of many crucial documents of the Union, they were signing a promissory note to which every European citizen was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that Europe has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as its citizens in the Balkans are concerned. Instead of honouring this sacred obligation, Europe has given a bad check to many people in South East Europe; a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds'. But I refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. I refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this region where I am coming from.

So, and at this opportunity in Reichenau, many of us have come because we believe that we can cash this check – a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. I also took the word in this very important meeting; I have also come to this hallowed spot to remind Europe of the fierce urgency of these questions. This is not the time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilising drug of gradualism.

Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy and prosperity we heard in Sarajevo on the summit of July 31, 1999 when the Stability

Pact was converted from a proposal into a long-term programme with clear objectives and structures that will monitor its implementation. Now is the time to help the people in the region to pass the autumn of freedom and equality.

As I said, I have a dream. I must say to you and to your organisations that it would be fatal for all of us to overlook the urgency of these questions and to underestimate the determination of a large number of professionals in the media to build solidarity and peace.

The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of the Stability Pact until the bright day of justice emerges. My dream is a civil society with open doors of opportunities to all people, a society of awakened citizens, Europeans, dedicated to work hard because there will be neither rest nor tranquility in Europe until my people in the region, or in every other part of Europe, will not have been granted all their rights as citizens.

Finally, I hope that all of us in our countries, everyone in his or her own way, will continue to build the bridge of regional cooperation. I am deeply convinced that we shall come a step closer to the objectives of our PfP Consortium Study Group "Crisis Management in South East Europe".

Today the question is not whether we need communication in the region, but when it will start to be established to a satisfactory degree. Democratisation of all countries in the region creates stability, just as technological development creates conditions for better communication. And then it is up to curiosity to carry out its part.

Conflicts, distrust, prejudice and a lack of real co-operation are certainly among the top reasons for the economic underdevelopment of South East Europe compared to the rest of the continent. These things can be improved by promoting communication among people living in the region. Direct communication unburdened by the political interests of political parties or individuals in power should play the main role in this process.

In this frame, I have good news. On May 7th, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in Bosnia and Herzegovina started after many years with a central news program at 7.00 p.m. for all the country. It is supported by the public televisions of both entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska. This is a good step for the process of reintegration of the country and a clear sign to the nationalistic forces that the process of reconciliation and of building confidence cannot be stopped.

The media can certainly be of help in the reconciliation process, but they cannot take the leading role. It is necessary that the responsible officers of the Stability Pact support those media professionals who maintained the language of information, not propaganda, because only those people have the right to call themselves "the media".

Thanking all of you for your kind attention, I need to repeat once again that we in the region 'do not want to be the backyard of Europe', but a normal part of our lovely common home - Europe.

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