

Article by Alexandra Stiglmayer in Ljiljan: "Bosnia and Herzegovina's Journalists and Media"

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My first encounter with Bosnia and Herzegovina's journalists took place during the war when I myself was a journalist. There were many who were struggling to do a decent job amidst the madness and pressures of the war, and helped us foreigners understand what was going on. But there were many more who did not struggle. I remember the infamous HTV correspondent from Mostar. At times, we happened to cover the same events, but his distorted or completely made up stories which I watched on TV in the evenings had not much to do with what I had seen happen during the day. What he did was an offense against the truth and the people who were the victims of the actual events.

I also recall a journalist who covered the 1996 elections in Srebrenica and passed on to me the information she had just received from an official: that more than 50 percent of the registered refugee voters, 6,000 out of 20,000, had already voted. I told her that 6,000 out of 20,000 did not represent more than 50%. She said it did because an official had said it; that one does not question what officials say.

We have come a long way since then. Today, most of the journalists I deal with as a spokesperson of the OHR are no longer the subservient lackeys of political parties or ideologies, most no longer allow officials to serve them nonsense. I enjoy working with them, though there are still things that disturb me. I am every time anew surprised at the nonchalance with which some of the journalists conduct their work; at the carelessness with which they attack people or institutions or run unsubstantiated hate campaigns. Sometimes, when my organization happens to be the victim and I call up the journalist to talk to him, I am simply told: "Oh yes, I know that my story is not well researched and probably not true, but it made a good story. People like reading such things. Don't worry." I do worry because I believe in the power and role of the media. Next to the three pillars of a democratic society – the legislative, the executive and the judiciary –, the media are the so-called fourth estate. They can overthrow regimes, they can initiate revolutions. But in order to acquire this power, they must report consciously and truthfully, so one can rely on the information.

The visible improvement in the field of journalism and the media is in my opinion partly due to the general normalization of life, but I am convinced that it is also the result of the efforts the international community has invested in establishing journalistic standards and a healthy media environment.

The story of these efforts is a long one. In 1996, when the High Representative did not yet have the powers he has today, we established OBN and Radio FERN as stations that would provide non-political and non-ideological information to the public across the country, outside the propaganda spread to varying degrees by the networks SRT, HTV/Erotel and RTV BiH. Journalist schools such as the BBC Schools or Media Plan opened. In 1997, we closed down Pale-dominated SRT, and a somewhat reformed SRT program started being aired from Banja Luka. A year later, the High Representative created IMC, today CRA, the Communications Regulatory Agency, which is issuing broadcasting licenses conditional on the adherence of journalistic and technical standards. Although I am aware that each denial of a license presents a small catastrophe for the ones who work in the affected station, I know that the overblown number of 200 radio stations and 80 TV stations, which fight over a limited advertising market, must be reduced. This will enable the remaining ones to put themselves on a sound financial basis. They will be able to pay their journalists more money to produce good stories and programming, the journalists will be under less pressure and will have time to do proper investigative journalism, and the stations will also have money to buy good programming from outside.

The same year when IMC was created, in 1998, we also began the process of establishing genuine public broadcasting. Since public broadcasting is intended to serve the public as the name indicates, and nobody else, it

has been an effort conducted in co-operation with this very public, which is represented by the members of the boards of Federation RTV, PBS and RTRS. Not surprisingly, it has been a protracted and difficult process, which is far from being completed. At the beginning, the ruling political parties obstructed whenever and wherever they could, including by threatening and buying individuals working in the stations. Then it became obvious that the networks had almost no financial means as they used to rely on generous "donations" from the political parties. Their financial administrations even were not familiar how to run the stations financially sensibly. It took a long time before they learnt that barter deals do not generate the cash needed to pay the employees, that employees who do not show up for work are of no use, or that they have to enforce the collection of subscription fees. The technical equipment turned out to be outdated and in desperate need of repair and replacement. In addition, though the influence of political parties has been reduced, the problem of thinking in ethnic patterns continues to pose a problem. But despite all the problems, which there were and still are, there is progress, and I do believe that Bosnia and Herzegovina will have decent public broadcasters in the near future.

Parallel to this effort, in particular the OSCE has worked hard on establishing a legal framework that will provide both electronic and print journalists with the conditions they need to carry out their jobs properly. The Freedom of Access to Information Laws will enable them to receive the information they need. The Defamation Legislation will, on one hand, protect them from inappropriate punishment for journalistic trespasses, but on the other hand force them to report diligently and carefully.

All these efforts have contributed to better journalism and media in this country, which, in the long run, will make up the fourth estate, the additional checks and balances that a democracy should be exposed to. As the spokesperson of the OHR I am looking forward to the day when journalists will confront me with something I will not have an answer to...