



STABILITY PACT FOR SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

Media Task Force Progress Report: January - June 2004

Introduction

The Media Task Force is one of the six core-objectives of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. By forging cooperation between donors, international organizations and regional partners, the Media Task Force (MTF) assists the development of independent and professional media from Moldova to Albania.

Cooperation with local organizations with a proven track record is crucial in the work of the Media Task Force. Under its auspices, media professionals work together in Media Working Groups in nine countries, providing feedback on priorities and projects. Together with these groups, the MTF developed a strategy for media support and singled out media legislation, television production and local media associations as priorities.

The Media Task Force works with Ministries of Foreign Affairs to determine priorities and coordinate action cooperates with the European Commission on regional CARDS assistance to the media and works closely with the Council of Europe as well as various international NGO's in the field of media development.

Activities

Generally speaking and with the exception of the crisis in Kosovo (see below), the first half of 2004 can be considered as positive for the MTF. The Media Working Groups issued statements and provided reports on developments in the media, as well as gave feedback on assistance activities and projects. The reports were distributed to an interested group of professionals working on media development in South Eastern Europe (within international organizations, Ministries of Foreign Affairs and members of the Stability Pact).

In cooperation with the Media Working Groups, the executive secretary discussed the need for media reform, particularly legislation and regulation, with local authorities and international organizations involved. Together with the secretariat, the visits of the Special Coordinator to the region were used to raise issues of concern in FYR Macedonia, Croatia and Moldova.

In the first half of 2004, the Media Task Force again reviewed project proposals to be provided to international donors. In total 13 projects were endorsed and funded and implementation is due to start soon. These projects meet the criteria and priorities of the Media Task Force. They will enhance regional cooperation between media outlets, improve media legislation, promote quality productions of television programs and increase the capacity of local organizations.

In addition, the MTF helped to coordinate, supported and advised donors on their media assistance. In particular, the executive secretary discussed future strategies for media support with several member countries Development Agencies and or Ministries of Foreign Affairs. The executive secretary also continued cooperation with the European Commission DG Relex and EuropeAid, on media assistance under the CARDS program.

In May 2004, a meeting of the Media Task Force was organized in Brussels. Among other issues, the position of public broadcasters and the reform of libel legislation were discussed. Furthermore, the meeting focused on future support to the media in South Eastern Europe. To assist the discussion, the Media Task Force prepared, together with the working groups and relevant organizations, an *Overview of Media Support to South Eastern Europe*, as well as country-by-country reports on support to the media.

Moreover, in November of 2003, the Media Working Groups prepared reports on the media situation in their respective countries. These reports were edited and bundled by the executive secretary and the full report *Media in South Eastern Europe* was released and disseminated. As a means of follow up to these reports, an *update on media legislation* in SEE is compiled monthly.

Results

Through its involvement, in particular by arranging funding for relevant projects of local partners and the interventions of the executive secretary, media legislation is brought closer in line with European standards. In five countries, training officials and raising awareness are improving the implementation of Access to Information. The program of the Council of Europe, implemented in the framework of the Stability Pact, addresses the implementation of broadcast legislation in most countries, in particular by providing legal expertise. Conferences were organized on topics of high importance, such as regulatory bodies, access to information, broadcast legislation and media ownership concentration. The issue of libel legislation has been the particular focus of much of the work by the Media Working Groups during this period.

This has resulted in improved implementation of legislation in Montenegro (broadcast law and access to information law), a draft broadcast law in Macedonia, the decriminalization of defamation in Moldova and Montenegro, comments on draft legislation in Croatia, monitoring legal developments in Bulgaria and improvements to the draft penal code in Romania

The amount of support provided to production of quality television programs has significantly increased due to the involvement of the Media Task Force. In the first months of 2004, another six series / documentaries have been added to the list of programs which received support. The programs address corruption, reconciliation, youth culture, social issues and the consequences for people being separated by the war. In addition, the MTF has supported the cross-border exchange of television programs, to boost information and mutual understanding, as well as closely cooperated with the EC in the development of support to TV production under the CARDS regional program.

The overview of media support indicates that genuine sustainability in this field is not yet possible. In the future, greater emphasis should be placed on lowering structural costs (property, rent) and increasing domestic contributions / membership fees of local forums.

Evaluation

The Media Task Force is well on track to meet the objectives set for 2004. The goal was to ensure libel would be decriminalized in at least two countries: Montenegro and Moldova have done so. Support for around 20 hours of quality television programs has been arranged and two conferences on media legislation have been organized. However, the draft broadcast law in Macedonia is still pending.

Ensuring media legislation is fully in line with European standards and implemented properly remains a difficult task. The broadcast council in Serbia is still disputed and awaiting a counterpart on Telecommunication to start its work. Discussions on broadcast legislation continue in Croatia, Bulgaria and Albania. The last six months have also shown that the management in public broadcasters remains vulnerable to political interventions (in the past three months, the directors in Serbia, Moldova and Bulgaria were fired).

No Media Working Group exists per se for Kosovo. The large number of international actors present suggested that key international actors were already strongly engaged there. The Stability Pact is ready to review the events of March this year in a broader regional context as well as suggesting activities, which could promote more professional media reporting. A panel discussion will be held at the next Working Table meeting of the Stability Pact, in Portoroz, Slovenia during which a debate will be centered on hate speech and broadcasting, which incites violence.

Challenges

Ensuring self-sustainability of responsible media outlets, training centers and watchdog organizations may require more time, yet international support is gradually diminishing.

The adoption and implementation of media legislation and regulation in line with European standards is a process, which requires readiness from domestic authorities, as well as international expertise and support.

Providing a sound legal framework for the media needs to remain on the agenda, together with associations to monitor the implementation, self-regulation to watch the quality of the media, support to production of socially relevant material and training for journalists.