



SPEAK UP! Conference on Freedom of Expression And Media in the Western Balkans and Turkey

International Press Institute (IPI) Contribution: Measures to Improve Press Freedom in Croatia

Representatives of the International Press Institute (IPI) joined a delegation of the South and East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO) in a fact-finding Press Freedom Mission to Zagreb, Croatia from 25 – 28 January, 2011.

The mission focused on topics including media concentration and transparency of media ownership, leading to pressure from political and commercial interests; attacks on journalists and impunity; the situation of national public broadcaster Croatian Radio-Television (HRT); and proposed changes to a draft penal code that would impose severe penalties on journalists for defamation, including imprisonment.

The delegation met with more than 60 individuals, including Croatian President Ivo Josipovic; representatives from major media houses; journalists from public and private print and broadcast media; representatives of the Croatian Journalists' Association; and representatives from the Austrian Embassy.

Based on these meetings, IPI believes that measures in the following areas could improve the situation with regard to freedom of expression and media in Croatia.

Increase Transparency of Media Ownership

Many private media owners in Croatia reportedly hold interests in non-media businesses, creating pressure from political and commercial interests that can lead to overt restriction on critical coverage of the government and influential companies due to fear of the loss of advertising revenue. The lack of transparency in ownership also leads to self-censorship by journalists who fear that critical reporting can lead to repercussions against their employment status. IPI supports steps to increase transparency of media ownership.

Dilute Media Concentration

State broadcasters run a severe risk of serving as mouthpieces for governments and political leaders. IPI supports independent public broadcasting with a mandate to satisfy the right of the public to be informed and to receive information that is accurate and factual. Croatia should therefore consider a process whereby state media is evolved into a fully-functioning independent public media.

Further, the majority of newspapers in Croatia are owned by two media conglomerates: the partly-German-owned Europa Press Holdings (EPH), which controls approximately 43 percent



of newspapers, and Austria's Styria, which controls approximately 46 percent. IPI supports enforcement of Croatian law capping private media ownership at 40 percent.

Reduce Impunity for Attacks on Journalists

Investigative journalists reporting on corruption and sensitive topics have been subject to physical attacks, but in many cases little progress has been made in holding assailants accountable. Authorities need to ensure not only that attacks on journalists are fully investigated in a transparent and timely manner, but that the masterminds who direct such attacks – in addition to those who physically carry them out – are prosecuted.

Stabilize Management of Public Broadcaster

HRT continues to face serious managerial difficulties as a result of several unsuccessful attempts made by its Programme Council to elect a new director. Journalists working for HRT also experience pressure from political and business groups, and these difficulties have negatively affected the broadcaster's functioning. IPI supports the installation of permanent management that supports the right of journalists to engage in critical reporting.

Decriminalise Defamation and Eliminate Imprisonment as Punishment

A draft penal code under discussion by a government working committee was unveiled for public debate in January 2011, addressing insults and embarrassment to honour and reputation. Under the draft, journalists found guilty of defamation could face imprisonment of up to one year as well as a fine equalling half of their annual wage. IPI believes that civil remedies are sufficient to protect honour and reputation, and that imprisonment or severe fines are both disproportionate and unnecessary.

Establish Media Self-Regulation and Journalistic Standards

Self-regulation is the optimal means of media regulation. IPI, which opposes statutory regulation, supports steps to establish a media self-regulatory body in Croatia. IPI also supports the adoption – on a self-regulatory basis – of ethical codes and procedures to establish journalistic standards, as well as training for younger journalists, to ensure that journalists engage in accurate and ethical reporting.