



South East European Network
for Professionalization of Media

***Addressing the problems and the needs of SEE media communities
through project development and implementation***

The South East European Network for Professionalization of the Media (SEENPM) is an association of 18 media development non-for-profit organizations from 12 South East and Central European countries. The Network has been promoting excellence in journalism through policy initiatives, advocacy, research and training since 2000. Its activities are based on the belief that joint commitment and cooperation are pivotal to the development of independent media, the strengthening of relations among journalists, the stability and the overall progress of the region.

The media landscape in the post-communist societies of South Eastern and Central Europe has dramatically been reshaped over the last twenty years. Free press is now guaranteed by the law, citizens have access to a wide range of public and commercial news outlets, and digital media have transformed the public sphere and keep providing innovative ways of receiving and imparting information and ideas. The South East European Network for Professionalization of Media and its member organizations have played a unique catalyst role in transforming the formerly state controlled press into a pluralistic system and significantly contributed to the strengthening of free, independent, responsible and viable media in the region.

At the same time, the mission of South East and Central European media development NGOs cannot be considered accomplished. The professional performance of most news outlets lags behind international standards, press freedom has significant deficits, media organizations are often divided along political lines, and commercial pressure is growing in the industry. Furthermore, in SEENPM countries one can also witness the deterioration of the quality of journalism, mostly due to the trend of tabloidization in news media and the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis which has particularly severely hit the traditional print press. It is to be added that most recently worrisome phenomena can be observed in the field of media regulation. One of the most striking examples is the new restrictive Hungarian media legislation which sets a negative precedent for EU candidate and potential candidate countries.

This document seeks to list the major shortcomings of the functioning of media and point out the areas and types of activities which SEENPM needs to put special emphasis on when implementing project activities.



**South East European Network
for Professionalization of Media**

Problems, challenges, opportunities for media development NGOs:

1. Over-politicization of media: News outlets are often divided along political lines, impartiality - as a basic principle of reporting - is ignored, facts and opinions are not separated, many media organizations have double standards, exercise self-censorship and favor specific parties or interest groups. Public service broadcasters are weak throughout the region and seldom capable of providing in-depth and unbiased information indispensable for citizens to make informed decisions. Public channels are especially vulnerable to political pressure, because the nomination of their top management and the approval of the annual budgets depend directly or indirectly on the key political players.
2. Economic pressure on media: As a consequence of concentration and/or lack of transparency of ownership, numerous media outlets serve particular interests and fail to fulfill the role of a public watchdog. Behind-the-scene deals determine the distribution/redistribution of television and radio frequencies, and faithful news organizations are often being sponsored through state-owned banks, government controlled foundations, and the advertisements of state companies. In SEENPM countries the market size is limited, the audience is fragmented, the purchasing power of media consumers is relatively low, and all this makes media companies financially vulnerable. As a consequence, news outlets would seldom cover the wrongdoings of their advertisers or any corruption case linked to their media owner's main business partners.
3. Decline in journalistic standards: The tabloidization of news media seems to be a dominant trend and sensationalist presentation often prevails over in-depth, unbiased, accurate reporting. As a consequence of the financial crisis, many news organizations downsized their staff and the work load of journalists has increased. The context of the events is seldom provided, 'copy+paste' journalism and the republishing of press releases and political statements are becoming more common. This situation hinders investigative reporting in countries where corruption and the lack of transparency of the functioning of public institutions are key issues. Furthermore, specialized reporting is weak, as journalists are often not equipped with the skills and knowledge to properly cover specific topics, e.g. finances, environment, healthcare, education, science. The deterioration of the quality of the discourse and languages in media can be observed, as well.
4. Deteriorating labor relations in media: In post-communist countries the employment situation of journalists is rather problematic largely due to the weakness of trade unions, the high number of free-lancing or self-employed journalists without proper contracts, and the lack of solidarity within the profession. The financial crisis severely hit media, especially the already struggling print publications. Due to bankruptcies, massive lay-



**South East European Network
for Professionalization of Media**

offs, and salary cuts, the position of journalists has considerably worsened on the job market. This affects directly the performance of reporters and, instead of quality, leads to 'quantity journalism'.

5. Inappropriate representation of minorities: Despite certain improvements in the coverage of diversity issues in the mainstream media of several countries, the stereotypical portrayal of minorities (ethnic, religious, sexual, gender) still dominates reporting, and these groups are underrepresented in the newsrooms, especially at the decision making level.
6. New media technologies: The rapidly transforming technologies and digitalization are deeply affecting media production and consumption patterns. On the one hand, a previously unthinkable richness and variety of content are available for citizens. On the other hand, the access is uneven and there is a digital divide between urban and rural areas, and the better-off and poorer strata of the society.
7. Participatory journalism: The emergence of civic journalism has challenged the traditional role of editors and reporters. The web universe has given a boost to citizens' participation in media. At the same time, there is no guarantee for the quality of the content, and professional journalistic standards and codes of conduct hardly apply in the blogosphere. The line between the private and public spheres is blurred. In such situation the enhancement of media literacy of the public has a key importance.

Priority areas for SEENPM

1. **Access to information** and **freedom of speech** remain key areas for the Network. Though the legal framework is in place in most SEENPM countries, there is a gap between the law and its implementation, and journalists often do not use fully the opportunities provided by the freedom of information acts. It is crucial to strengthen international free speech standards and resist over-regulatory trends in media. In this area cooperation with relevant international and regional partners (Council of Europe, OCSE, UNESCO, IFJ, WAN, GFMD, Article 19, IFEX, CPJ, IPI, SEEMO, Access Info, n-ost, etc.) is pivotal
2. SEENPM needs to put special emphasis on **Media Accountability Systems** when designing and implementing its projects. Media self-regulatory mechanisms and ethical standards have to be in the forefront of its advocacy, training, and research activities.
3. The Network will also put special emphasis on the **assessment of media performance** and sustainability. The evaluation is to include the indexes used by international organizations and donors.



**South East European Network
for Professionalization of Media**

4. SEENPM needs to address the problems of the lack of transparency of media ownership, **clientelism**, and political instrumentalization in media through research and advocacy activities.
5. **Investigative journalism** has to be strengthened and supported through training and cross-border reporting projects. This is crucial in the fight against corruption which often hinders social and economic development in SEENPM countries.
6. When conducting training programs for journalists, the emphasis must be on **specialized reporting** including areas such as international/regional relations, environment, health, education, diversity, finances. The use of **multimedia** tools and **computer assisted reporting** must be part of the curriculum of brush-up workshops organized for media professionals.
7. SEENPM needs to become active in implementing **media literacy** projects with focus on the young generations.