

Date: 11 March 2015

Region: Western Balkans



At the symposium dedicated to the state of the media in the Western Balkans held at Columbia University, the Media Diversity Institute (MDI) chaired a panel. The symposium gathered journalists and media experts who were discussing the changes in the media since the end of the Yugoslav wars. Censorship and self-censorship in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia have already raised red flags among media monitors, investigative journalists, and foreign and local observers.

Therefore it was not surprising when the key note speaker at Columbia University, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media [Dunja Mijatovic](#) declared that '*freedom of the media in the Balkans is worse than after the wars in the '90s*'.

Mijatovic added that there is an urgent need to protect dignity of journalism in the South Eastern Europe. Also she believes that the European leaders should strongly condemn any threats against journalists. '*Women are specifically targeted by hate speech and smear campaigns online – most women present here, me included, have and are experiencing this,*' said Mijatovic.

One of the organisers of the event, [dr Tanya L. Domi](#) , pointed at Macedonia as the country with the worst human rights conditions for LGBTQ people in the western Balkans.

The audience gathered at the [Harriman Institute](#) of Columbia University wanted to know more about the state of human rights and minority rights in the Western Balkans and why women are so much exposed to misogyny and discrimination by the media. Inflammatory language directed to minority groups, yellow press dominating the discourse and politicians dictating the boundaries of acceptable speech, were also discussed at the event on 11 March in New York.

The University of Albany journalism professor, [Rosemary Armao](#) , analysed the media ownership in the Western Balkans. According to her, it is unclear who exactly owns what media outlet and who has influence over them. ‘

*Training and educating of journalists are critical. Also, there has been a lack of solidarity amongst journalists,*’

stressed Armao. She is concerned that profession is deteriorating in the South Eastern Europe because of an increase of self-censorship.

According to the findings of a survey quoted by Lily Lynch, co-founder and editor-in-chief of [Balkanis](#)

t, 49% of journalists in the region encountered some type of self-censorship. Talking about the media in Montenegro, a correspondent for the weekly newspaper Monitor, Milka Tadić Mijović, said that there has been increased violence towards journalists and hate speech directed at them. ‘

*In Montenegro which is a country dedicated to the EU integration, the civil society is shaken by the government abuse, shrinking media market and strong monopolies* ,’ said Tadic.

MDI Head of Operations and Development in the US, Marija Sajkas, who chaired one of the panels, concluded that ‘*the general tendency of the region towards EU integration and the ongoing institutional changes did not pursue much of the democratisation of the press*’ .

Although participants agreed that Bosnia and Herzegovina enjoy most of the freedom in the region, [Aida Cerkez](#) , chief of the Associated Press bureau in Sarajevo, warned that Bosnia is

very chaotic and divided country. 'Media are heavily politicised, and there is no press freedom. Media are connected to politicians and also dependent on them,' said Cerkez suggesting an urgent expansion of a public space to the Internet.