

## **Report on ELIAMEP's two – day international conference on the role of the media in conflict resolution in South East Europe, Halki, Greece, 8-9 June 2012**

This four – page long report summarises the context of ELIAMEP's work with Serb and Kosovar journalists, which has led to a two – day dissemination conference in Halki, in 8-9 June 2012 and also contains information the sessions of the conference, the main questions debated in the conference and a set of interesting conclusions.

The Western Balkans and particularly the thorny issues related to Kosovo remain a priority for EU foreign policy. The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Baroness Catherine Ashton often underlines the importance attributed by Europe on the area. On 19 February 2011, for instance, she asserted: ‘This region is a priority for me. We want to ensure that we are offering cooperation and support’. On that basis it is certainly of increased significance that Serbia and Kosovo have entered since March 2011 a negotiation process under the umbrella of the EU on issues related to their European orientation and every-day problems.

At a critical juncture for the Western Balkans, the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) organised a workshop from 9 until 11 March 2011 with young Serb and Kosovar-Albanian journalists. The workshop was coordinated by members of ELIAMEP's research staff (Dr. Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos and Dr. George Tzogopoulos). This event took place in Athens within the context of the ‘Early Warning Project’. It was generously financed and supported by the ‘International Alert’ and the ‘EU Stability Instrument’. Along with ELIAMEP, the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence (Belgrade) and the Foreign Policy Club (Pristina) contributed to the organisation of the workshop in Athens.

In order to disseminate the findings of the Athens workshop ELIAMEP organised a subsequent conference on 8 and 9 June 2012 on the island of Halki. This event, which was also generously supported by International Alert, gave the opportunity to leading scholars and policy-makers to elaborate on the Foundation's policy recommendations and exchange views on current developments in the Balkan Peninsula. The role of ELIAMEP as a facilitator of rapprochement in divided societies was acknowledged and suggestions for further action were made.

The Halki conference was structured around seven different sessions. In the first session, following Dr. Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos' (University of Athens and Senior Research Fellow, ELIAMEP) welcome remarks, Dr George Tzogopoulos (Postdoctoral Fellow, ELIAMEP) and Dr. Dimitra Dimitrakopoulou (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and Research Associate, ELIAMEP) assessed ELIAMEP's project on the role of media in divided societies. In the second session, Ms Mirjana Tomic (Press Media Adviser and Project Manager, South Media Organization), Dr. Ioannis Armakolas (University of Macedonia at Thessaloniki and Research Fellow, ELIAMEP), Mr. Agron Bajrami (Editor in Chief, Koha Ditore), Ms. Ivana Konstantinovic (News Editor/Presenter, TV B92) and Ms. Ilda Londo (Project Coordinator,

Albanian Media Institute) elaborated one the media landscape in various countries of South-Eastern Europe.

During the last panel of 8 June, which was chaired by Dr. Evangelia Psychogiopoulou (Research Fellow, ELIAMEP), Professor Jan Zielonka (University of Oxford) gave a lecture on democracy and mass media in Eastern Europe.

On the second day of the conference (9 June), several more sessions took place. In the fourth session of the Halki conference, Ms. Violeta Gligoroska (Media Programme Coordinator, Open Society Foundation), Mr. Ardian Arifaj (Senior Researcher, KIPRED), Mr. Gursel Kadri (Columnist, Milliyet Daily) and Ms. Ana Petrusseva (Country Director, BIRN) examined the role of the media in conflict resolution over the past decade.

The fifth session was organised by the staff of MEDIADEM, another EU-funded research project on the media, also coordinated by ELIAMEP ([www.mediadem.eliamep.gr](http://www.mediadem.eliamep.gr)). In this session, Professor Paolo Mancini (University of Perugia), Dr. Dilek Kurban (Program Director, TESEV), Mr. Christian Mititelu (Audio-Visual Council of Romania), Dr. Evangelia Psychogiopoulou (Research Fellow, ELIAMEP) and Dr. Nada Švob-Đokic (Institute for International Relations) endeavoured to analyse the trends in the relations between mass media and economic and political power.

Moreover, in the sixth session, Ms. Barbora Maronkova (Information officer for Western Balkans, NATO), Mr. Ross Biggam (Director General, Association of Commercial Television in Europe), Mr. Mihajlo Colak (Program Coordinator, Open Society Foundation for Serbia), Mr. Michael Martens (Correspondent, FAZ) and Ms. Sonja Seizova (Political and Press Affairs, OSCE) identified the role of state and non-state actors in the shaping of public opinion.

Finally, Dr. Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos, Mr. Richard Reeve (Head of Research and New Initiatives, International Alert) and Mr. Veton Surroi (Chairman, Foreign Policy Club) summarised the main conclusions of the Halki event, underlining lessons learnt and policy priorities.

Amid pessimistic and optimistic views for the future, most participants agreed on the important role of the media and their impact on populations in divided societies. They also shared their often common experience either as journalists themselves or as observers of the journalistic work. As a whole, participants considered the region of South-Eastern Europe as having specific features and urged the international community – in particular the EU – to remain actively involved and support free media institutions. Significant research questions asked and observations made included the following ones:

### **Main Research Questions/Themes**

- 1) Can the media be different than the rest of society? Or do they represent existing tendencies and reflect current trends ?

- 2) What is the role of the media in a changing world ? Are they accustomed to new developments ? How do they deal with inconvenient truths ?
- 3) What is the role of the media in state-building in newly emerging states ?
- 4) How can the international community contribute to an improvement of relations between opposing sides in divided societies ? How can the international community set up its communication strategy ?
- 5) What is the impact of the economic crisis on the media in South-Eastern Europe ?
- 6) How do new technologies impact on the modus operandi of traditional media ?

## **Main Conclusions**

- Media articles are often overwhelmed with prejudices about ethnic identities and local cultures which lead to the publication of biased stories.
- Reports on war crimes are particularly problematic because emotionally-driven coverage often dominates media discourse.
- Journalists find it hard to criticise the government of their own country on foreign affairs.
- Participants agreed that they 'do not need to be patriots' but acknowledged that traumatic memories cannot be ignored.
- Knowledge of political history was considered as crucial in the attempt of journalists to report on past and current developments.
- Many journalists still have a 'war mentality' which they cannot easily abandon. Within this context the 'war frame' prevails in their reporting and can hardly be replaced by balanced and reconciliatory stories.
- There is margin for co-operation along with talks between Belgrade and Prishtina. Journalists from both sides suggested to exchange visits in these cities especially when they need to report on sensitive issues.
- Although news are normally the vehicle for transmitting significant political messages, the so-called 'infotainment' is also of increased importance. This includes reality shows and soap-operas.
- Dealing with new technologies remains an issue of concern. This is related not only to the possible impact of electronic newspapers on print ones but also on the broad usage of anonymous sources which often lead to misinformation.
- A new wind of open-minded journalism can be born, but this will mainly depend on an extensive discussion on how to interpret the past and in particular the history of political conflict in the Balkan region.

- Participants believe that prospects for high quality journalism still exist in Serbia and Kosovo and are prepared to contribute to this end.
- If a future workshop is organised, invitations will have to be addressed to managing editors of media outlets as they are the persons responsible for the decision-making process in their organizations.
- Most of the journalists mentioned that the problem concerning the quality of reporting is related to the strategies of editorship and/or ownership and not to themselves as professional journalists.
- What influences the work of journalists is their concern about audience reaction. Audiences are not yet prepared to read/watch/listen to evenly balanced news stories.

ELIAMEP has a continuing interest in conflicts in South East Europe and in the relations between media and democracy in the contemporary world and will pursue further research in those subjects.