

Comment: Equal Airtime Rule Kills Off Debate

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The straightjacket forced on Kosovo's media since March has only worsened its condition.

The way the local media has reported on Kosovo's election campaign so far only shows how - five months after the March riots - it remains in as poor a state as ever.

The media feels it is still hostage to the events of March 17, when it was widely condemned for using inflammatory, hateful, language, and for irresponsible reporting.

The crisis dates back to the evening of March 16, when first reports were aired on the alleged drowning of three children in the Ibar river, near divided Mitrovica.

The next morning, school children's protests on the Albanian side of Mitrovica turned violent and in the ensuing chaos 19 people were killed. Some 4,000 locals - mostly Serbs - were forced from their homes.

International representatives heaped blame on the Kosovar media for stoking the tragedy.

But the regulations and recommendations that international bodies have handed to local media since then have only caused stagnation.

Bodies such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, which is responsible for building democratic institutions in Kosovo, if anything, have worsened the media's un-professionalism and increased tension.

One result of these internationally-sponsored recommendations is the rule obliging the Kosovo media to grant equal airtime or newspaper space to each and every candidate and party in the election.

It is as if a media commissioner on a mission to "democratise" the US insisted on the most politically irrelevant party getting the same airtime or column space as the Democrats or Republicans.

The "equal time" rule, which has lent a nonsensical quality to the election debate on our TV screens, was compiled hastily and without consultation with local journalists.

It gives many people the impression that the officials who came up with this rule are from North Korea, or Cuba, rather than from democracies.

This kind of bureaucratic management makes people doubt whether they can ever build a democratic society or effective media with international powers who think rules such as this will encourage debate.

Clearly, this regulation was produced with the aim of reducing the chance of emotive reporting in a heated election campaign.

This fear stems from the March events, after which the OSCE and the Temporary Media Commissioner, TMC, blamed emotional reporting for stirring up the riots.

While many will agree with the critics of this emotional reporting, those same critics fail to mention the international institutions that were in charge of building up the Kosovo media for four years before March.

Moreover, after the dramatic publication of their condemnations, especially of the public television station, these media outlets have simply taken refuge in silence, which can hardly be counted as the fulfilment of the proposed recommendations.

The OSCE, which was supposed to help develop the media in Kosovo, seems to have professionally castrated it, especially with reference to public broadcasting.

This “castration” has been all too visible in the recent election campaign, where the pressure imposed since March appears to have strangled any chance of a meaningful debate. There is less freedom of speech now than before the riots.

The media, especially public television, have been transformed into chambers where journalists keep minutes of events, rather than actually reporting on them.

With no embarrassment at all, the international bodies are building up an obedient and bureaucratic media in Kosovo, where people are afraid to speak freely and see free speech as if it were the devil.

The international officials - who are only here temporarily - would rather stifle free speech than let it develop, in case it backfires, as it did in March. As for the local staff, they are poor and want to keep their jobs.

One exit strategy from this situation would be for the local media to accept part of their responsibility for the March events, not least because many observers would agree that some of their professional errors were not deliberate.

They were often a consequence of inexperience and a result of having very young journalists on the job reporting fast-moving events, amid a lack of official sources.

The local media have been condemned too much, at the expense of any self-criticism on the part of the international institutions for their own failures.

After all, the OSCE provided the training for the journalists in the public broadcasting sector, and organisations such as this ought also to be held responsible for any consequent unprofessionalism.

The TMC’s recommendation for international officials to be restored to their former workplaces in the Kosovo media needs to be struck down immediately.

Any recommendation that undermines local staff in this way runs totally contrary to the spirit of what the international bodies came to do in Kosovo in the first place.

Despite the fact that the March events were a tragedy, this bad experience should be seen as a lesson for future Kosovo journalists, not as a means to build up bureaucratic infrastructures for censorship and time-keeping.

The OSCE Media Office and the TMC should leave media development in the hands of Kosovans, without heavy-handed bureaucratic interference. They should leave the courts and the auditors to judge mistakes.

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Location: North
Korea
Kosovo

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