

Kosovo Journalists' Deep Suspicion Of OSCE Media Controls

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An OSCE plan which seeks to build an environment for free media via initial strict regulation has raised fears of censorship among Kosovo journalists.

One of the international community's first moves in Kosovo has been to draw up a plan for wide-ranging media reform in the province, including the formation of a Kosovo Media Board, responsible for overseeing and, where necessary, imposing penalties on local media.

The plan, which envisages strict media licencing and standards with powerful enforcement mechanisms, has largely been inspired by the international community's experience in Bosnia. However, it has also raised fears of censorship among local journalists, in part provoked by an article in *The New York Times* which first revealed details of the plan, which has yet to be formally published.

The *New York Times* cited critical comments by Ronnie Koven, from a US media group not especially noted for its experience in the Balkans, and suggested that the new media regime sought to "control the reaction of the local media on the changing situation in Kosovo". Kosovo journalists and editors, whose media are often part-funded by western donations, are now wary of the regime they will be obliged to work under.

The plan's drafters were commissioned by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the international organisation tasked with building democratic institutions and establishing an environment for free and fair elections. All senior western journalists with several years' experience reforming media in other parts of the Balkans, they say that Kosovo should not be viewed as a normal, functioning, democratic state.

Instead, they believe that the province should be considered as an occupied territory, emerging from many years of repression and armed conflict, in which the occupying peace-keeping force and its civilian counterpart work to plant the seeds for a free media, independent judiciary and thus create conditions for free elections. Moreover, they draw parallels with Germany in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War where an initially strict regime was gradually relaxed as German society recovered from its Nazi legacy.

The Media Board is to be comprised of five Kosovo public figures, described by Daan Everts, head of the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, as "well respected intellectuals". They are Mahmut Bakalli, a former Communist leader of Kosovo, Pajazit Nushi, former head of the Council for the Defence of Human Rights and Freedoms in Kosovo, Lirie Osmani, a lawyer, Shkelzen Maliqi of George Soros's Open Society Foundation and Aca Rakocevic, a Serb representative.

Since the five Board members have little media experience and Everts and two of his staff - Douglas Davidson and Mirjana Robin from the OSCE's media affairs department - will oversee the work of the Board, some local journalists fear that the Board will serve as a ceremonial prop for OSCE decisions. The OSCE points out that members of media regulatory boards in other European countries do not necessarily have media backgrounds.

"We don't want to bring foreign dictators or rules here. We would like these things to originate from here and that's why we gave so much importance to the creation and the functioning of a Kosovar Board," said Everts.

The plan also envisages the formation of a Media Regulatory Commission and a Media Monitoring Division, along similar lines to that which currently exists in Bosnia. The proposed bodies, according to OSCE

officials, do not aim to "censor the local news media, but to support and monitor them with the ways that the Western press functions".

"We don't want to make comparisons between Bosnia and Kosovo, because both are very different cases," said Davidson. "The international community entered Bosnia in 1995 and has learned lessons there on how to promote free and independent media and we are now using this experience to avoid repeating mistakes."

According to The New York Times article, the Media Regulatory Commission would write and administer a "broadcasting code of practice" and "a temporary press code" for print journalism, and then "monitor compliance and establish enforcement mechanisms". OSCE officials say that the Commission will work closely with the Media Board to come up with appropriate codes.

"The concept of codes of practice, based on minimal journalistic standards, exists in all European countries," said Everts. "Given that journalism was never good in this region or elsewhere in the Balkans, these codes are important."

Everts pointed out that decisions on codes of practice will only be made once consensus has been reached among Kosovo's media community.

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