

AMERICAN INFLUENCE ON MEDIA DEMOCRATIZATION IN ALBANIA

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Abstract

The article aims to make an analysis by identifying and describing all activities, projects and initiatives undertaken by the government, American institutions or organizations in the media sector in Albania after 1990. This contribution is extended to all aspects and professional and organizational phases of media. The first aspect of the analysis has to do with the US contribution in opening and consolidation of the Department of Journalism at the University of Tirana, to make it a laboratory to prepare, certify and graduate journalists of the free press era. In this context, there will be identified the number and the type of texts that have been recommended, translated and financed in order to form a rich, modern and up to date bibliography for students and professors of the Department of Journalism at the University of Tirana. A very useful and effective contribution in this respect is the possibility to have at the Department American lecturers and professionals to share their professional and academic experience! The second aspect, which was simultaneous with the first one, was the infrastructural support to the first free and democratic media. At a time when media was in poor conditions and lacking technology for printing newspapers, the International Media Fund donated the printing house "Democracia", where were printed the first six independent or opposition papers in the country. And the third aspect is related to what is considered "investment on the individual", by training media professionals, reporters, executives, managers and administrators of print and electronic, national and local media. This investment in human resources was conducted through short-term and medium-term trainings and comprehensive studies at Master level. It is difficult to measure exactly the effectiveness of this contribution, but what is for sure is that, it has a positive impact in the media market in ensuring standards of the profession.

Keywords: *media, democratization, investment in infrastructure, investment on the individuals, encouraging self-regulation*

The following article aims to identify the forms, methods and the impact of the United States of America in establishing the environment required by media to be free. This analysis is based primarily on gathering information from those who are the direct beneficiaries of this impact, and analyzing the little documentation available in this field.

Governments, intergovernmental agencies, NGO-s, and foundations have invested considerable amounts to projects in support of the independent media, journalists with the same views, content, and reformation of media legislation and regulatory agencies of broadcasting, state education and training as well as of media related institutions in the Western Balkans from 1995 to 2005¹. But even these donors might be ranked based on the continuity, contribution and the method chosen to

¹ Aaron Rodes "Ten Years of Media Support To the Balkans: An Assessment", Published under the auspices of Yasha Lange on behalf of the Media Task Force of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, pg. 15, 2007.

assist media in Albania. For the Director of the Albanian Media Institute, an organization engaged in media policy issues, the United States of America are probably the most focused and active country regarding the assistance to media in Albania. "If some other countries, members of the EU or not, have been active for some time, the United States, have had a constant commitment"². This observation is supported even by other actors and journalists of various media in Tirana.

25 years ago, when Albania had just started the phase of change from a media as a "propaganda weapon" to the free press, the US assistance for the development of the media in the absence of the local civil partners, was characterized by three features,³ direct support, spontaneity and emergency. However, from the outset, the objective was to support every aspect related to infrastructure, organization and professionalism of all levels of the media industry, in other words, to create suitable environment for the freedom of media and a free media. "In 1992 a group of 10 journalists, representatives of democratic press⁴ visited USA, in an intertwined trip between training and visiting some of the largest newspapers in the country, like "Washington Post", "New York Times", the training center in Atlanta, and the studios of radio "Zëri i Amerikës" ("Voice of America"), recalls Remzi Lani, one of 10 journalists which were selected for this trip. It seems that the goal was to change the mentality on media, converting it from a propaganda tool to the forth power, which is the natural role of media in any democracy.

In terms of a centralized economy owned by the state and with a weak infrastructure, the first newspapers which started to be published immediately after the democratic changes, had problems in being printed. In these circumstances, the US in 1992 started work for the construction of a modern printing house for printing newspapers, especially those of opposition attitude. The investment with a value of \$ 1 million was a grant from the "International Media Fund" and marked a revolution in the field of print media⁵. The technology of this printing house made a more than a century leap in relation to the technology of the time, used for printing newspapers in Albania. The Printing house equipped with modern machineries would produce a circulation of 25 thousand copies per hour, reported the journalist of the Albanian Television in the news on the day of the inauguration of the printing house on February 2, 1993, a ceremony attended by the President of the Republic, Sali Berisha and the USA's ambassador in Tirana, William Ryerson⁶.

² Extracted from the conversation the author of the article had with the Director of the Albanian Media Institute, Remzi Lani.

³ According to Aaron Rodes, direct support" refers to funding given to specific media outlets and journalists to allow them to pay staff, purchase equipment, pay operating expenses, create and distribute media content, and develop their operations. The main characteristic defining this large category is that of targeting specific media, but the methods of direct support are diverse.

⁴ As democratic press, according to Remzi Lani, former editor of the newspaper "Zëri i Rinisë", were considered the newspapers of the opposition parties, such as "Rilindja Demokratike", official edition of the Democratic Party, "Alternativa SD", official edition of the Democratic Alliance Party, or "Sindikalisti", official edition of the Independent Trade Unions of Albania, as well as the press bodies inherited from the one-party system, but which had played a role in the democratic transition, such as "Zëri i Rinisë", "Drita", or "Bashkimi".

⁵ Here's how the former editor of the newspaper "Bashkimi", Qemal Sakajeva, remembers this event: "The Albanian national television aired details of the event, about its value of \$ 1 million and 7 newspapers cooperating with the Printing House "Democracia": "RD", "Republika", "Alternativa SD", "Drita", "Zëri i Rinisë", "Bashkimi", "Sindikalisti". Taken from <http://gazeta55.al/atentat-si-ne-filmat-me-mafia/>

⁶ The author has received a video copy of the news prepared on this.

Together with the Printing house in the newsroom of the newspapers in Tirana arrived the first computers from US, accompanied by American trainers who taught not only the use of computers, but also professional skills and ethics of the fourth power.

While in 1992, the Open Society Foundation "Soros" had opened its office in Tirana. During its first three years (1992 - 1995) the foundation was focused on access to information as a powerful tool for building an open society, encouraging individual initiative and the impact on social change. The main programs of the foundation are in the field of media, education and culture⁷.

With the opening of the "Soros" Foundation offices in Tirana, the Albanian journalists and media could have free consultations on its premises, on main international agencies "Reuters" or "Associated Press". To promote and support the growth of professionalism in media, "Soros" allotted annual awards for the best deliverer of professional genres, divided by type of media.

One of the first projects of the "Soros" Foundation, which seems to have moved in parallel with the construction of the printing house, was translating the basic textbook of the journalist profession, "Reporting and writing news", by Melvin Mencher, a professor in 'Columbia University', one of the basic texts of the journalists' profession repetition. But also one of the basic texts in the syllabus of the Department of Journalism at the University of Tirana, opened in 1992. The American contribution for the ongoing training of Albanian journalists in general and for the consolidation of the department of journalism in particular, where young journalists would be graduated, has been in two directions. First in enriching its scientific bibliography, through translation and publication of American texts. Currently, more than 10 translated texts, which constitute the basis of subjects in the Department of Journalism and Communication are published by American authors or research centers (universities or research centers). Texts such as "The elements of journalism", "Political Journalism", "Global Journalist", "Universal Journalist", "Canonical texts" are published with the financial support of the Office of Public Affairs of the Embassy of USA in Tirana.

Secondly, by Knight Journalism Fellowships, and by deploying American specialists / coaches to the Department of Journalism or the Albanian Media Institute, or to both these structures.

But journalists were trained not only in this way. "Approximately more than 10 journalists have studied for 6-12 months at the best study centers, university or training centers, in the US. And we are pleased that some of them are already in key positions in media in Tirana", says the Public Relations Officer at the US Embassy in Tirana, Guri Lekloti, pointing out that the investment on the individual has been one of the contribution forms on improving the standards of journalism.

Several years later, the American support was extended with the International Research & Exchange Board (IREX), which cooperates with local partners to increase the professionalism and long-term economic viability of the media, newspapers, radio, television and internet. Specialized programs and small grants enable having balanced investigative reporting, better management of the media, and support of press freedom⁸. Since its beginnings in Tirana, IREX aimed to create a debate on media freedom standards and encourage and investigative journalism. In 1999, with the

⁷ Taken from <http://www.osfa.al/historiku>

⁸ Taken from www.irex.org

support of the foundation, started its multi-year journey the quarterly magazine “Media Shqiptare” (Albanian Media), which as its editor wrote, had a mission; to assist in the development of modern Albanian media⁹. Since 2001 this institute supports and guarantees the overall quality control of the annual report "Sustainability Index of Communication Tools", (MSI). MSI, measures the degree of the protection of freedom of speech, professional journalism, diversity of news sources, business management and supporting institutions. By measuring the same objectives and indicators annually, MSI makes it possible to compare the progress or regress of the media sector in time. That's why it serves as an efficient supporting mean and informs on media development efforts¹⁰.

In 2003, IREX with the support of USAID tried to interfere in the practical stage, by supporting two concrete initiatives on the media product (content - substance), as models which could be followed. First was the investigative program "Hapur". IREX supported media anti-corruption efforts by providing training on investigative reporting, grants for in-depth anti-corruption reporting in newspapers and on internet and broadcast media, as well as specialized training in fields such as; human trafficking, police reporting, and reporting of local government. Secondly, it tried to regenerate local media by organizing political debates with candidates for mayor of the municipality units. For local elections in Albania, IREX-organized political debates on television for more than 100 local candidates in various cities across the country. Broadcastings of Local TV stations proved that they were the only political debates with politicians of all political parties¹¹.

Two years later, IREX attempted to influence and support the organizational aspect of Albanian journalists aiming the self-regulation and to give voice and strength to the journalists. In 2005, with the support of IREX was established the Union of Albanian Journalists, which came after several previous failures to form an effective union. Union compiled the work contract for journalists and opened discussions within the community of journalists about it¹².

Despite the contribution, support and impact that this support had in the Albanian media, the statistics show that Albania has received in total less funds than each of the other Balkan countries, except Montenegro.

⁹ Vladimir Zoto, Rikthehet media shqiptare (Albanian media is back), “Media shqiptare”, Nr.12, fq 5.

¹⁰ The author is for three years now one of 12 experts engaged by IREX to prepare MSI.

¹¹ At <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/irex-annual-report-2003.pdf>

¹² Aaron Rodes “Ten Years of Media Support to the Balkans: An Assessment”, Published under the auspices of Yasha Lange on behalf of the Media Task Force, of the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe, pg. 34, 2007.

Table 1. *Registered support on media in the Balkans, 1996-2006 (x 1mln Euro)*

	Training	Direct support	Media Environment	Total
Albania	6.9	1.8	1.9	10.6
Bosnia-Herzegovina	17.4	42	27.7	87.1
Croatia	2.4	19.7	14.5	36.6
Macedonia	3.4	9.2	11.2	23.8
Montenegro	1.3	2.9	3.4	7.6
Serbi	5.4	26.4	13.1	44.9
Kosovo	6.1	45.6	6.9	58.6
Balkan	42.9	147.6	78.7	269.2

According to the public relations officer of the US Embassy in Tirana, Guri Lekloti, only from the embassy projects, funds for the media during these 25 years of free media range from 30 to 50 thousand USD per year.

Meanwhile, the Director of the Albanian Media Institute, Remzi Lani shows that the institute receives only 20-30 thousand USD per annum from the US Embassy funds. This shows another aspect of the American contribution that for strengthening organizations focused on and for the media.

Media Development and Media for Development

After more than a decade in supporting media, donors seemed to change tactics. Donors were not focused any more on improving the organization / editorial, journalist per se, but wanted to improve the quality of reporting functioning to the development of society as a whole.

"Finally, we are noticing a trend which, if it continues, it could be harmful. Media Development projects are rapidly being reduced, while being replaced with projects based on the philosophy of media development. The important publication of the World Bank Institute "The right to show" shows the links between public information and poverty reduction. Media Development is replaced by Media for Development.

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So, mid-career training centers have developed capacity in what is called the current training courses or training courses on key issues. (*Reporting on Human Rights, Business Reporting, Environmental Reporting, Reporting on Culture, etc.*) These projects have contributed significantly to the specialization of journalists, the combination of knowledge with professional skills, while on the other hand, they have served to consolidate the capacities of media centers and other NGOs.

Of course, these issues are critical for all the above-mentioned countries, but the need for investing in media development can't be considered as fulfilled.

But the while the need for professional journalism training has increased, the funds for training courses have been reduced significantly. Especially this is true for professional skilled training

courses. Different Donors and partners in general support topical courses (Such as business reporting, reporting environment, etc.), or roundtables on freedom of expression issues (access to information, Defamation, etc.), and Supporting they are always less professional skills training courses.

Ten years ago the professional skills courses accounted for the overwhelming part of mid-Career Centers Activities. Presently, they account for a small Percentage. Perhaps the needs for such courses are not the same as They Were a decade earlier, undoubtedly but the needs are still quite significant.

Likewise, Media Development Assistance must also continue in fields other than building capacities for media professionals.

One of the most critical issues of the development of the media sector nowadays in the countries that are targets of media assistance is the lack of coherent media policies. The projects supported so far by several donors have certainly influenced in improving legislation, drafting the codes of ethics, establishing self-regulation bodies, but in most of the countries the goal of adapting a consistent media policy that would offer a vision for the development of the media sector has yet to be achieved. Moreover, considering the progress and the problems that globalization offers, it becomes imperative to talk of a continuous process of media policy reform.

Conclusion

The US government has played an irreplaceable role in establishing a suitable environment for a free media and the freedom of media in Albania, not only through donations, but also through continuous attention on the performance, progress or regress of media in Albania.

Despite the goal to move from projects for development of the media in projects for media development, the ongoing education and training of journalism practitioners remains a necessity. Encouraging and supporting investigative journalism and its models will encourage the rest of the media.

One of the weaknesses of the Albanian media is the union of journalists. In this field international agencies and foundations should provide advice and should advocate the strengthening of journalist trade unions, but only when these unions can demonstrate significant membership, sound management, and vision.

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