Media development by OSCE field missions

Mark Thompson

In late 2003, the Netherlands-based media-freedom organisation ‘Press Now’ commissioned the first external study of the media development work by OSCE field missions. These missions have been deeply involved in supporting the development of free and pluralist media in many post-communist transitional countries since the mid-1990s. With its remit for democratisation and human rights, its capacity to put people on the ground, and its ability to bridge the gaps between governmental and non-governmental actors and local and international organisations, the OSCE has inevitably been drawn into this role. In researching the report, the authors — Mark Thompson, Yevgenia Manro and Peter Palmer — visited eight missions and interviewed scores of mission members, diplomats, media activists and others. This article summarises their key findings and conclusions.

Since 1992, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has deployed 25 field missions, of which 18 are active today. They vary in size from a handful of staff to several hundred, and in annual budget from EUR 1 million to EUR 48 million. Beyond the different emphases of their mandates — on the electoral process, conflict-resolution or prevention, border-monitoring, police training, or the return of refugees — they share a concern with democratisation and human rights.

About a dozen missions have carried out some form of media development, ranging from ambitious attempts to restructure the media sectors in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, through major institutional reform projects in Serbia and Macedonia, down to smaller-scale engagement in the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia. This work takes place against a background of increasing awareness that freedom of expression is a key human right — a pillar of the ‘human dimension’ — and that media development is fundamental for democratisation and post-conflict stabilisation.

Accountable government and free-market economies cannot thrive without media freedom. If the most influential media outlets are not able to scrutinise the actions of political and economic elites, they cannot serve the public interest. The need for such scrutiny is especially urgent in transitional states, and most of all in

---

1 Dr Mark Thompson is a research consultant and author in the UK. He is one of the experts that drafted the Press Now report on media development by OSCE field missions.
2 The complete report may be downloaded at www.pressnow.org. The project was endorsed and practically encouraged by the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. However, the views and findings of the report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Representative.
3 The term ‘missions’ is used here for convenience. In fact, only seven of the current field operations are called missions; the remainder are entitled ‘Presence’, ‘Centre’ or ‘Office’.
countries where governments may commit their peoples to war. For an uninformed public is much less able than an informed public is to identify and uphold its own interests.

In sum, the rights of citizens to know, to seek out, to receive or impart information, and to freely discuss issues of public importance — rights clearly upheld by the UN and the OSCE — are essential to a stable and healthy democracy. The appropriate role of OSCE missions is to do for the media sector what they do for the judiciary, the civil administration, and the police. Namely, they should try and ensure that the media can function according to the legal principles, professional standards and ethical norms that have been established in stable liberal democracies.

Against this background, ‘Press Now’ decided in 2003 to examine the media development work of OSCE field missions, which has grown with such speed. As well as visiting OSCE institutions in Vienna, OSCE field missions in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Croatia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Tajikistan were visited, and scores of mission staff, diplomats, media experts, and activists interviewed. While these are not the only missions involved with media development, they include — with one exception — the missions that are most active in this field. They also represented the three key OSCE regions of south-eastern Europe, the southern Caucasus, and Central Asia.

Wider patterns of activity and achievement in the media development by OSCE field operations were discovered. The resulting report included recommendations for each mission, as well as general conclusions and recommendations. These general findings form the remainder of this essay.

**Assistance plus pressure**

It is beyond doubt that there is a need for the OSCE missions’ work in media development. Although many interviewees were critical of this or that aspect of OSCE activity, most believed that valuable results had been achieved and argued that the OSCE should increase its engagement and activity.

The provision of assistance to private media outlets sends a political message to the state authorities where those outlets function. It should not require political dialogue with those authorities, unless they make it impossible for private media to operate. In such cases, the international community’s duty is to persuade the authorities to establish a level playing-field for the media, so that private outlets are not disadvantaged. This usually involves legal and other reforms, but probably also far-reaching changes at the level of elite habits and expectations. Even where the independent media are not actually fighting for their mere existence, these kinds of structural changes are still needed wherever OSCE missions are deployed.

Financial and technical assistance on the one hand, and political pressure on

---

4 The exception is Kosovo. Regrettably, for organisational reasons neither the Kosovo mission nor the mission in neighbouring Albania (which are both expressly mandated to assist with media development) could be included in this project.

*Helsinki Monitor 2004 no. 4*