

Media Consultation Dialogue Discussion Paper

On unpleasant truths and unfounded beliefs

Background

Relations between Serbia and Kosovo have for decades been marred by, amongst other factors, political manipulation, an unresolved past, and conflict-generating language. In both cases, the persistence of nationalist narratives, often grounded in notions of victimhood, means that only the sufferings of 'their people' are recognised. Empathy for 'the other' is in short supply. This Media Consultation Dialogue brought together media professional and civil society representatives to discuss factors underpinning this phenomenon, whilst exploring possible ways for overcoming some of the observed deficiencies in the coverage of unpleasant truths.

This MCD explored some of the following questions:

1. Why is it so difficult to see the suffering of 'the other'?
2. What could media and civil society do to facilitate reconciling with the past, including reporting on unpleasant truths?
3. How could the media (and possibly civil society) change the current state of affairs?

All participants attended in a personal capacity and the proceedings were conducted under the Chatham House Rule.

Discussion Points

There was a consensus among the participants that over the past twenty years or so, the media in Serbia and Kosovo have been insensitive towards the pain of the other. They adhere mostly to their own narratives, with predominantly nationalistic undertones. If they mention victims at all, they speak only about their own. One

participant even described the media as the 'champions of intolerance', with those targeted by pro-government media shifting according to prevailing politics.

1. All participants agreed that media reporting in Kosovo and Serbia concerning the 'suffering of the other' is neither accurate nor appropriate. Indeed, reporting often serves to deepen intolerance.
2. Mainstream media and public broadcasters are under the influence of their respective governments, which directly affects the accuracy and professionalism of their reporting. Political or owner control of the media, censorship and, more importantly, self-censorship have been highlighted by a vast majority of participants as key problems.
3. Political manipulation pertains to figures about the number of dead or missing, and (in Kosovo) the victims of sexual violence, according to various participants.
4. There was a broadly shared conclusion that a media outlet would be stigmatized if it started reporting about the pain and suffering of the so-called 'other'. An example quoted was Albin Kurti's firing of his adviser, Shkelzen Gashi, for stating that there were armed individuals amongst the Kosovo Albanian community who committed crimes against the other communities.
5. There was a profound difference of opinion regarding the extent to which Serbia and Kosovo have faced up to the past. One participant asserted that Serbia had faced these issues in handing over members of its political and military leadership to The Hague, asserting that Kosovo was now only entering this process due to the Specialist Chamber. This was disputed by various participants, who pointed to the continuation of aspects of Serbia's political leadership from the nineties and a lack of reconciliation at the societal level.
6. In Kosovo, reporting on the Specialist Chamber tends to be slanted. There is insufficient focus on the charges contained within the indictments, in particular the crimes allegedly committed against other Kosovo Albanians or members of the non-majority communities. Reporting has instead focused solely on crimes committed against Kosovo Albanians. One participant asserted that the issue of pain and suffering of the Kosovo Albanian community has been leveraged for ad hoc needs.

7. Several participants agreed that certain standards had been established by the international community and continued to be broadly respected when it comes to the language used towards other communities in Kosovo. For instance, there were prohibitions about using pejorative terms towards minorities. This stand was disputed by some other participants.
8. In Serbia, the use of a derogatory and dehumanising term for Kosovo Albanians has become the norm in tabloid media and their electronic counterparts. Serbs, meanwhile, are often portrayed as the 'eternal enemy' by Albanian language Kosovo media.
9. Social media were identified as the major battleground which fuels polarizations, however, the discussion's focal point were the traditional media which are supposed to implement appropriate editorial policies.
10. Media agendas are overwhelmed with political and sensationalist events. Space to show the suffering of 'the other' and represent the human side of both societies is extremely limited. One participant complained that the hyper-production of political content leaves insufficient time for human stories; a problem compounded by the tendency for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue to monopolise discussions about Kosovo-Serbia relations.
11. In Serbian media, incidents against Serbs in Kosovo find appropriate space, but crimes by Serbian authorities against Kosovo Albanians are neglected. In the Kosovar media, reporting suggests that there have been no ethnically based incidents in the last ten years, but only problems deriving from organized crime, especially in north Kosovo.
12. People in parts of Serbia not close to Kosovo (i.e. Sabac in the west) are largely uninterested in the Kosovo issue.
13. Negative reporting on the Serbian community in Kosovo sometimes makes linkages to Russia. A church in Peja/Peć was accused of 'healing Covid through the ringing of the bells', which an 'expert' described as a 'traditional Russian practice'. In reality, the church had previously announced that its bells would ring every hour during the pandemic.

14. The lack of cooperation between Serbian and Kosovar journalists was identified as a major problem. The Journalistic Associations don't cooperate and very few media do.
15. The media (especially public broadcasters) by and large do not bother with educating their audience, even though it is one of the three fundamental principles upon which public broadcasting is based (to inform, to educate and to entertain).
16. Serbian media representatives also identified the following specific reasons for a lack of empathy towards the other:
 - a) Effects of tabloids (including most TV stations with a national frequency but tabloid editorial policies);
 - b) Threats and pressure by radical parts of society;
 - c) Social media pressure;
 - d) A lack of political will to recognise the suffering of "the other";
 - e) General politicization of everyday life.
17. The Kosovar media representatives see as the main problems:
 - a) Stigmatization of those who do write about the suffering of others;
 - b) Self-censorship or control by owners or authorities;
 - c) A public discourse by politicians which resembles the 1990s;
 - d) Populist and vindictive rhetoric by politicians carried by the media without any fact checking or contextualization;
 - e) A lack of political will to recognise the suffering of "the other";
 - f) Presence in public life of the 'war generation'; and again – lack of political will.
18. Civil society was praised as the frontrunner in facing the past and dealing with issues of transitional justice, both badly neglected by the media and political leaders. The latter only focus on the pain suffered by their nation and lack the will to face issues together.

About the Media Consultation Dialogues

The Media Consultation Dialogues take place within the framework of the project *Amplifying local voices for equitable development (ALVED)*, which is funded by the UK Government's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF). The Dialogues bring together professionals and experts from different sectors of the media in Kosovo and Serbia to contribute to a deeper understanding of the media environment and potential ways to ways and means to confront and challenge the divisive narratives.