



The Power of the Press: Media's Role in Democracy

Democracy! The Podcast

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Adrienne Ross 0:06

Hi, and welcome to *Democracy! The Podcast* that shines the light on some of the darkest challenges facing the fight for democracy around the globe.

Joe Biden 0:17

Democracy will and must prevail.

Ross 0:21

This podcast is brought to you by the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening direct from Washington DC, with support from our friends at the United States Agency for International Development through the Global Elections and Political Transitions Award. I'm your host, Adrienne Ross.

Today, we're talking about the role of media and democracy. We'll hear what it's like to be an independent journalist and talk with the director of USAID's Democracy, Rights and Governance Center. But first, let's head to the Balkans to get a closer look at the media landscape and Kosovo from our Communications Officer, Amy Radlinski.

Amy Radlinski 1:03

In 1999, the United States and its European allies went to war to protect Kosovo. Ever since then, the US Government has remained heavily invested in the nation. In 2008, Kosovo declared its independence, a move Serbia, backed by Russia, called illegal.

Today, the work to consolidate a vibrant democracy faces many challenges. For instance, a lack of integration continues with Serbia and the European Union. Plus, a huge chunk of Kosovo's population is very young and super wired, creating a lot of open access to media throughout the country, and making its citizens particularly susceptible to false stories. Misinformation spreads like wildfire, fueling a massive lack of trust in the media.

In fact, during Kosovo's February 14th snap elections for parliament, CEPPS media monitoring, thanks to funding from USAID, tracked manipulated data, fake cures for the Coronavirus, and

stories that encouraged ethnic divisions. It was a landslide victory for Prime Minister Albin Kurti and his party, but given Kosovo's digital landscape, how did media-based disinformation play a role in the election? And does media have a bigger responsibility to ensure the integration of democracy in general?

Ross 2:17

Thanks, Amy. Today, we're joined by a few special guests to talk about media's role in democracy. First, Ambassador Nancy Soderberg is the National Democratic Institute's Resident Senior Director for Kosovo. She has dedicated her career to advancing democracy all over the world, notably serving at the White House and as a Congressional staffer, and even a candidate for US Congress. Ambassador Soderberg knows a bit about breaking glass ceilings. In 1995, President Clinton appointed her to be the first woman Deputy National Security Adviser, and later the alternate representative for the US to the UN with the rank of ambassador. In those roles, Ambassador Soderberg was integrally involved in the Clinton administration's policies towards Kosovo.

Her colleague, Pajtim Gashi is also joining us today. Pajtim is NDI's Senior Program Manager. He has examined a variety of election specialties for more than 10 years, particularly focusing on media and digital democracy. Interestingly, Pajtim is also a native of Pristina, Kosovo's capital and largest city. We are so happy you're here today. Thank you so much.

Let's talk a little bit about the February 14th snap elections in Kosovo. Can you describe what you saw happening between the media and the candidates during the lead up to the elections?

Ambassador Nancy Soderberg 3:37

Absolutely. And first of all, thank you so much for the invitation to join you for this podcast. And I want to thank CEPPS and, of course, USAID for their generous support of our program, which makes our presence here in Kosovo. The February elections were snap elections after the government unexpectedly fell because of a court ruling. And so, the society really didn't have a lot of time to get ready for this election, so it was intense, political tensions were high. We'd had leaders go to The Hague, it was the second election in the last two years. And you had a real threat from information disorders. The politicians were hurling insults at each other, we had Russia promoting various narratives. And here in Kosovo, it's a divided society with the Serb minority population and the majority Albanian being less and less integrated. And what we found is that there was widespread false information, exaggerated information harmful information.

Overall, the reporting was fairly accurate, but the media did play a role in spreading information disorders without putting information in the right context or calling out when it was blatant interference. So, citizens are aware of the disinformation but they still kind of believe it and misogyny was very present against the candidates, among candidates, and in the media as well. So, it was it was very intense; judged free and fair. And we had a historic win by one party taking really the majority for the first time in Kosovo's history since its independence in 2008, which may augur a period of stability. But it's Kosovo, so anything can happen.

Ross 5:22

Can you talk a little bit more about the misogyny that you saw? Could you give us some maybe some specific examples of the kind of disinformation you saw? And why do you think people were so inclined to believe this?

Soderberg 5:34

Well, I think on why they're inclined to believe it, I think that Kosovo is ripe for disinformation, because it still doesn't have final agreement and recognition with Serbia, it's still not into the EU, visa liberalization hasn't happened. And so, it's still a very kind of new country that's still finding its way in the neighborhood, as well as in the region. And what you see in the misogyny here, it's a very patriarchal society. The 1999 War is still very present here. So, you have a lot of wounds from the past, but it's a largely patriarchal society. So, politicians, both men and women were attacked in the media, but women were subject to blatant misogyny, talking about what they eat, what they wear, talking about how they're dressing, failing to report on the substantive interactions with issues and with voters. And the media has to really call itself out for how they portray women. And of course, women insult other women too.

So, it's a very tough place for women here to be in politics. There is a quota and there was a record number of women elected to this parliament on February 14th. For the first time ever, two Deputy Prime Ministers, second time we have a woman as President, and so we're making huge progress. But there's still a lot of work to do here.

Ross 6:55

Pajtim, can you talk about what kind of reactions you've heard or what Kosovars think when they talk about media-based disinformation? Do they recognize that as that?

Pajtim Gashi 7:04

Well, access to the internet in Kosovo is among the highest in Europe and has increased significantly in the recent years, which at the same time is making our country, I would say, very vulnerable towards information disorders. So, Kosovar citizens are aware of information disorders, but they still affect public opinion. So, 74% of citizens believe platforms regularly or occasionally report information disorders, also up to 30% do not discern some narratives as false or distorted. NDI public opinion research shows that 32% of citizens believe that platforms regularly report false information stories with another 29% believing that disinformation is shared on social media. 42% believe that this phenomenon happens occasionally. And according to the research, 38% believe that this happens for financial reasons. And 17% believe that this reporting is done on purpose to push a certain agenda, when we will try to understand why this phenomenon is happening. So, despite this awareness, false narratives had an impact on the public opinions of Kosovo citizens.

For instance, narratives spreading disinformation on COVID-19 were believed by 18 to 39% of the population, while 22% believed that some of the most inflammatory statements promoting political division.

Ross 8:36

Those are some numbers. Nancy, how do we think that this media-based disinformation affects the political landscape?

Soderberg 8:43

It directly contributes to political division, political turmoil. What you see is attacks being hurled at each other among politicians using false and biased information against them, which is then simply repeated. In this most recent election in February, we saw new Facebook groups and fan pages emerging that themselves were spreading disinformation, blatantly spreading false accusations and charges information. The largest political parties targeted each other with harmful information as well. And what you see is sort of half-truths, which in our polling, erode confidence in democracy and essentially frustrates people.

The age group that's most susceptible to these narratives is 18 to 24. And so, I think this society has a lot of work to do in making sure that people are aware of the misinformation out there that they know how to do their own fact checking, and that politicians stop spreading outwardly false information. And the media needs to do a better job of identifying disinformation when it is just that.

Ross 9:53

Absolutely. And I understand that you've all been sharing your findings directly with journalists. How has that been going?

Soderberg 10:00

We've had a really robust program of monitoring the information media environment here for a year and have engaged with NGOs and journalists and really have a fantastic partnership which actually Pajtim runs, so I'll turn it to Pajtim.

Gashi 10:16

Yes. So, we believe that media and journalists have a key role in combating information disorders here in Kosovo. So, we as NDI have established a very good partnership with consolidated media in Kosovo and also with journalists as well. And it's worth mentioning the cooperation with association of journalists in Kosovo especially. So, we have organized thematic workshops with

journalists such as disinformation during electoral processes, or the role of journalists in political communications, where NDI's media monitoring findings were presented, as well as an also best practices in combating disinformation. And all this data was shared and discussed with different stakeholders and participants.

Moreover, NDI has been able to organize the second edition of Information Integrity Conference, which is called DISICON, and that was organized just recently, in June, for two days, and under the overarching theme of the rise of today's information in digital democracy. This conference offered detailed information on the overall information environment in Kosovo, a global, European, regional and local perspective on information integrity, disorders, challenges, as well as best practices on how to combat these fundamentals.

During these two days, the conference has created the opportunity to bring together different local and international field experts in media literacy, and experts from different media industry, social media, journalism, regulatory bodies, academia, our political parties, and civil society actors to discuss all these fundamentals.

Ross 11:50

It sounds fantastic, it's really dynamic and helpful, I would imagine, to those journalists. What can be done about this violence against women? Nancy, in particular, it sounds like it was very scary and very personal for these candidates.

Soderberg 12:03

Very personal. The now president Vjosa Osmani was the subject of attacks against her looks or appearance, her husband. And women in general are attacked, that the head of the Central Election Commission was also subject to really harsh attacks as well. And what we've seen is that as women step into these leadership positions, they are increasingly the subject of attacks, which serves as a deterrent for any woman to get into politics. So, it's really a huge challenge for the society that we need to really get the whole society to recognize that this is a problem and identify this misogyny and call it out.

And I think the media has a real role in trying to make sure that they have fair and just representation. For instance, when you're in a debate, make sure that the women are fully represented and the debate is during primetime, not a time when no one's watching it. We should not have what they call 'man-els', which is all men panels, you want to make sure that women are fully integrated and equally represented. And I think you just have to have a different approach on publications and doing this. And we have a number of programs on this front, and I'll ask Pajtim to talk about some of the programming that NDI is actually doing to push women into leadership positions.

Gashi 13:23

Yeah, we as NDI have observed online hate speech and targeted disinformation campaigns, attacking woman candidates and other vulnerable groups in society. And this was also presented from the findings of our media monitoring of 2019 election campaign. And we have seen that violence against women in politics, which includes online violence, bullying, and harassment can discourage women from taking their roles in political leadership. So, in response to that, we have launched advanced Woman's Leadership Academy digital skills for women focused on combating these issues, through digital campaigns, and through different advocacy campaigns as well. And this was organized in an intensive eight-week course during May and June. So, during the pandemic's very challenging time we managed to virtually deliver this great training for women from different political parties.

Soderberg 14:15

And on the issue of gender, I would encourage your audience and listeners to have a look at our [Gender Assessment Report](#). It's on NDI's website, we just published it, it's a very lengthy study with world renowned experts. And that's kind of a roadmap of what parties, civil society, government, and the citizens of Kosovo can do to support women in politics. And it's got a series of great findings and recommendations I would recommend to you.

Ross 14:42

Absolutely. In fact, we'll have that as well on the cepps.org/podcast website as well, so listeners are able to check it out both at NDI and the cepps.org page.

Soderberg 14:54

Thank you.

Ross 14:55

Absolutely. What do you think the future Kosovo's media holds in regard to electoral reporting? We've seen sort of the same thing happened globally. It's not just unique to Kosovo, but in this country, what do you think will happen?

Soderberg 15:09

Well, Kosovo is on the cutting edge of much of this. It's in the Balkan region, it still has tensions with Serbia, we've still got Russia and China competing for influence. So, it's really a testing ground for what the world is undergoing. And it can help test solutions as well. And so, what we're recommending is that you really have to have a strategy to prevent disinformation and reduce the

challenges that it presents to democracy. Make no mistake about it, these kinds of disinformation campaigns do threaten fragile democracies across the globe, not just here in Kosovo.

Ross 15:47

Thank you, Pajtim and Ambassador Soderberg.

Now to help us gain a better understanding of what it's like to be a journalist in places like Kosovo, we're joined today by an internationally respected voice on independent journalism, President and CEO of Internews, Jeanne Bourgault. Jeanne has spent a tremendous amount of her career in places where dramatic shifts in media and political landscapes were taking shape. It's important to explain that Internews is not a news organization, per se, Internews trains, journalists, digital right activists, and tackles disinformation. Internews is also a partner of the CEPPS Consortium, and these organizations work together with funding from USAID to strengthen independent journalism all over the world. Thank you so much for joining us today, Jeanne. Can you talk a little bit about what it means to be an independent journalist in somewhere like Kosovo or Tunisia? What's the job like? And what are some of the risks that these journalists take?

Jeanne Bourgault 16:42

Journalists all around the world are facing increased security risks, either from government or criminal intimidation, over the stories they cover and how they're covering it. This can range from harassment, to jailing, to actual violence against them or their families. And so, every day a journalist in a country like this wakes up with a mental equation about, you know, what can I do or not do to protect myself and my family that can lead to self-censorship in order for them to be able to tell another story in another day. They also face a lot of competition in the information landscape, right? There's a lot of outside influences, authoritarian regimes are trying to sort of control the narrative in their countries. This is really big in the Balkans, certainly, but sort of external voices that are trying to control that local narrative. But they're also facing inside massive disinformation campaigns and all sorts of that clouds a whole information landscape from social media and internet sources. Third, they face really serious economic challenges. Their personal financial situation is a challenge, the market collapse of the news industry has led to massive layoffs and has led to salary cuts. And so, working in such a difficult job, on top of these other challenges, is just showing you what journalists are dealing with. And finally, now these days, there's COVID and so, it is a double challenge. One, they're covering a very complicated and changing story, at the same time, they are physically putting themselves in danger as they cover because they're reporting during a pandemic. So, in truth, journalists, in these countries in Kosovo and Tunisia and all over the world are one of the toughest, most dangerous professions in the world today.

Ross 18:21

And so, this might be an obvious question. But why do these journalists keep doing this job?

Bourgault 18:27

Well, I think they're passionate about their mission as the role of journalists. And this sort of gets into a little bit about the role of journalism in a democracy, which I know we wanted to talk about as well. They are the ones who bring the relevant, actionable news that their communities need, whether it's education, elections, public health, the local business environment, they're the ones who track government budgets to make and hold governments and businesses accountable for their promises.

Ross 18:58

They really do believe that they're on a mission driven assignment. And thankfully for that, because not everybody would want to do this job. What impacted trust the journalists have on a democracy?

Bourgault 19:09

And let me give you an example, so, I'm not focusing on the countries that we're focusing on, but in Liberia, we've run election programs there over several years. And in 2017, Harvard actually had a research team that conducted a random control trial, watching the media engagement with the election for the 2017 election. And we'd encouraged a series of radio stations to run political debates and study showed that those communities that enjoyed the sort of repetitive political debates and issues out there on a really regular basis, participated significantly more than communities that didn't, and it really affected the vote. And so, there's very there's a very direct relationship that journalism has with a democracy. But we also just see more broadly, a 2016 survey by the Pew Research Center showed that the most engaged citizens in any community are those who consume the most local news and information. And without news, voting rates drop, fewer people join civic organizations and fewer people run for office. There's a lot of other studies that show that without solid local reporting corruption rises. So, it really is a public forum for discussion and investigation and if it disappears it really undermines democracy at the community level in particular.

Ross 20:26

One US leader who has kept a sharp eye on media's role in democracy is USAID Administrator Samantha Power. Power recently made the point at the agency's Democracy, Rights and Governance Conference earlier this year that the US needs to “right size our investments to boost independent media”. Here now to talk more about media sustainability is the Director of USAID's Democracy, Rights and Governance Center Rosarie Tucci. Ro, as everyone knows her, has also served as the DRG Center's Deputy Director and Senior Advisor to the Deputy Administrator of USAID. Thank you for being here.

Can you explain a little bit about why the Administrator's focus on media is so important? And what else USAID and its partners can do to aid independent media and reporters abroad?

Rosarie Tucci 21:15

We think media serves several functions and two in particular that I can mention. First, it serves as a platform to support public debate and discourse, right? Sometimes we refer to that as the modern-day public square. So, essentially, it's an important venue for pluralistic discussions that can help unpack solutions to some of the modern day major societal challenges we're facing, whether that's economic opportunity and inequality, climate change, pandemic response, I mean, pick any one of the immense issues we're grappling with right now, you know. At an individual level, it can serve as a platform for providing information to help citizens make decisions everyday decisions about their lives.

But second, it also, as many of us know, is critical to holding those in positions of power, whether political or economic, to account, right? It serves as a typical watchdog function, and in that way, it serves as a check on all branches of government. And the example we often use is the power of investigative journalism, right, to uncover corruption among government officials or within institutions. So overall, media is critical to developing a healthy information ecosystem, a tool that helps ensure a robust supply of accurate fact-based information is available to individuals and societies.

Now, turning to your question about what USAID is doing about this. I think, armed with this knowledge and the values that we have, we're working to help our media professionals face a number of challenges that they're having. But the broader objectives are to secure financial sustainability of quality journalism, number one, and number two is to protect the independence of journalism and mitigate those subtle economic and political tactics that power interests use to capture or influence media coverage.

Ross 23:10

One of the things we looked at a lot in this episode is how explosive digital media has been in some of these countries, particularly Armenia, Kosovo, and Tunisia. And so, with the rise of digital and social media, we recently saw the administrator make some comments that market dynamics and repressive governments want to control the narratives of independent media in many markets. And we've witnessed that we're talking about that in this podcast, some, though, are talking about an extinction event. Can you talk about what that means and why independent media extinction would be such a threat to democracy?

Tucci 23:47

We're seeing a crisis in the viability of media, right. And that's for a handful of reasons. In general, you know, there's been a significant change in that information ecosystem. And I referenced that,

you know, the changes in consumption habits, how we are obtaining our information where we're obtaining it looks dramatically different than 20 years ago, and that's really due to, I would say, a cocktail of issues that are happening right now, that's become very dangerous, created challenges to democratic resilience. And so, some of the things that we're seeing are the collapse of the traditional media business model, right, with many independent media institutions, confronting what is an acute market failure for a number of reasons such as decreased ad revenue, much of which is being transferred online. Another dynamic that we're seeing is the rise of political influence on media. So that's not necessarily new, but political actors are becoming much more effective at it, right? And so in some of the most extreme cases, what we're seeing is being referred to as media capture a dynamic which enables political and financial elites to manipulate the media market, right, by interfering in advertising and ownership models weaponizing spending and directing the media to those that give them more favorable coverage.

Well, another evolution that we're seeing is these tactics are not only being used internally, but they're also increasingly being used to achieve broader geopolitical goals, right? So, for example, Beijing and the Kremlin are manipulating foreign information environments by a number of ways. They're funding overseas news outlets that spread propaganda and disinformation, they're paying to place their own content in local media, they may be trying to acquire content dissemination platforms, or even purchasing local advertising agencies to direct ad revenue.

Ross 25:48

It's sort of an overwhelming issue, right? When we start to look at what the media is responsible for, and then, sort of the attacks the disinformation, the malign influence that we see undermining the work that good journalists are doing every day. What's the best way for someone at home to support USAID and independent journalists abroad?

Tucci 26:06

We all play a role in maintaining and updating our own information literacy and applying good practices in sharing reliable information. So that could mean checking our own news sources, ensuring we're sharing accurate data and practicing debunking and discrediting stories. That can mean supporting our local media outlets and journalists to stay viable and active. As part of larger organization. What we hope to see is more engagement in legal and policymaking advocacy. So, we're really helping to shape the laws individually in our country and abroad. There could also be support for a director tactical support, such as applying resources to counter large scale messaging campaigns that spread disinformation.

More broadly, I would say that we really need to look at sustainable approaches that work to bolster media sustainability. So, solutions that address the resilience of these information ecosystems because we all know we can address the symptoms of the problem. But if we're really not getting at the underlying root causes, we won't be able to affect that long term change that's really needed here.

Ross 27:21

One of the other things that Ro pointed out during our conversation was governments that attack the media and spread false information are exceedingly successful at polarizing societies. One CEPPS partner, V-Dem, recently published a report that reveals all the dynamics and patterns of an autocrat's playbook, you can find a link to the V-Dem study at www.cepps.org/podcast.

Coming up on the next episode of democracy and the podcast: the Republic of Armenia. This ancient land today is a hotbed of political turbulence, were two colliding forces ushered in new levels of malign influence and disinformation. We'll look at one program designed to help a government communicate. Plus, we'll talk with the president of the International Republican Institute, who shares some inspiring words on freedom and what's at stake in the world today. That's all ahead on our next episode of *Democracy! The Podcast*.

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