Geopolitical Influence on Media and Media Freedom in the Western Balkans

Nani Klepo*

DAVA Analytic Brief No. 3, September 2017

Introduction: A Troublesome (Media) Transition

Free media are considered as the fourth pillar of democracy, the watchdog that is essential for social progress and raising the public awareness. Such a status of media still stands today. However, globalization and the Internet transformed it into complex platforms that wrap people’s lives and significantly influence them. The role that media used to have on political and social processes is now growing exponentially with the modernization and constant consuming of either social or traditional media.

Countries of the Western Balkans in their transition process failed to develop free media, but instead, media were used as tools for political elites to maintain and increase their influence within the country. If one speaks of complete transition in the Western Balkans today, or – at least – its final stage, the media would be the factor that proves otherwise.

In the beginning of the ‘2000s, media in the Western Balkans failed to face problems of corruption, manipulation and political propaganda that – in time – evolved to be an easy target for external actors and open possibilities for increasing their soft power in certain countries and, therefore, in the entire region. This brief aims to analyze how globally (or regionally) relevant powers – US, Russia and Turkey – are using the media in Western Balkan countries and its loopholes to maximize their geopolitical interests.

The geopolitical landscape of the Western Balkans is quite challenging. Within one region interests of several global actors intervene, collide and influence to a high extent the political situation in the area. Thus, Russian influence can be seen in Serbia and Republika Srpska (constituent part of Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as by constant interfering in Macedonia. Turkey has a special connection to Bosniaks in Bosnia, to Albanians and to Muslim citizens in Macedonia.

On the other hand, after 2000, the United States handed over the peacebuilding process in the Western Balkans to the European Union which maintained a presence through its main conditionality mechanism: the accession process. Despite the decreased US influence in the region, the rapid accession of Montenegro to NATO proved that the geopolitical importance of the Western Balkans for the US still exists.
Media played a significant role in achieving such influence (and attaining the consequent political interests), being used not as a transmitter or channel for deploying information, but to create and regulate the political context and relations. Numerous indicators are showing that media freedom and its susceptibility to influence represent a reason for concern. According to the World Press Freedom Index, the whole region is in category “with noticeable problem” of which Bosnia and Herzegovina is ranked the highest, better than the EU member Croatia, taking the 65th position, while the lowest is Macedonia on the 111th position (from 180 ranked countries).

Also, candidate countries in their progress reports issued by European Commission are constantly failing in implementing the legal frameworks and achieving the determined goals. A failed transformation of media into independent information services and “grey privatization” (that has been implemented in the transition phase) led media into a situation of non-transparent economical dependency and ownership, used by more powerful actors.

**Croatia**

In the special case of Croatia, a major issue in media freedom is the interference of government in the work and broadcasting of the public service - HRT - and using it as a tool of ruling political elites. Not only the media content is being shaped politically, but the personnel and main directors are replaced at every election. In a major Croatian private media company, Hanza Media, 50% of the shares have been acquired by Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung Medien Gruppe (WAZ), one of the biggest newspaper publishing houses in Germany. The second biggest publisher in Croatia is totally under the Austrian control of Styria Medien AG, while Croatian commercial televisions are also under foreign ownership: RTL is part of German RTL and NOVA Tv is owned by the American Central European Media Enterprises (from 2018, NOVA Tv will be under United Group – property of the American KKR investment firm – along with the N1 television, a regional informative media broadcasting also in Serbia and Bosnia). These media giants developed into platforms, controlling internet media and social media as well.

**Serbia**

In Serbia, the media are like a mirror reflection of the (geo)political turmoil in the country. On one hand, work started – in 2014 – at the N1 Television (a regional informative partner of CNN, part of United Group) while on the other hand, in 2015, the news agency Sputnik (an official radio station of the Russian Federation, that also includes a web page) began broadcasting.

Thus, Russia recognized the media as a perfect tool for increasing its soft power in Serbia. An instrument which generates high rewards with minimum investments. A Russian news portal has been created and prepared for a Serbian version which also includes daily news from Serbian fairs. Furthermore, two major Serbian newspapers
Politika and Geopolitika – get supplements such as Ruska Reć and Rusija i Srbija, which are published by Russia Beyond the Headlines.

However, one of the main reasons for the heavy decline of media freedom in Serbia since 2014 is the (re)election of Aleksandar Vučić (former prime minister and current president of Serbia) who is not likely to tolerate the open criticism of the government. Considering Russia’s close ties with part of the Serbian political leadership that controls and uses public media services for self-promotion and political marketing, the overall Russian impact on the media landscape in Serbia is significantly high.

With the above-mentioned media platforms, Russia also reaches the audience from Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as the Serbian communities from Montenegro and Kosovo. Furthermore, in analyzing the two foreign media channels (N1/Sputnik), there is a noticeable difference in the selection of topics and interlocutors, the point of view on government, on local social and foreign-policy issues, while both channels being driven by strong political and ideological orientations.

Montenegro

In Montenegro, there is an imperceptible external impact on media in the country, especially on public broadcasters and newspapers, which are rather under the authority of the ruling political elite. Two major private televisions (Pink TV and TV Prva) are branches of Serbian televisions (with a pro-government perspective). However, the divided political picture of Montenegro is consequentially reflected by the state of the media. Anti-governmental media platforms like Vijesti (under the ownership of the Daily Press - with WAZ, Styria and Media Development Investment Fund as main stakeholders) and Dan newspapers (Jumedia Mont) are often under pressure, as any critique aimed toward the authorities is being prevented through prosecution, threats and – sometimes – even physical assaults on journalists.

Macedonia

The political crisis in Macedonia revealed that the authoritarian system is suffocating the media to such measure that Freedom House in 2016 classified it as a “no free media country” (the only one in Europe besides Turkey and Russia). The previous quasi-authoritarian regime (in close relations to Russia) has been trampling the rights and freedoms of the media by controlling the public service television, while the pro-governmental private media houses are not transparent regarding their ownership.

During the political crisis that started in 2015 there was a leak that proved the illegal monitoring of journalists and media workers being instructed by high political figures on news content and their selection. The Russian influence on Macedonian media during the crisis was both indirect (through the ruling elite) and direct (by
arguing the existence of an anti-national coup devised by the opposition through media and social networks).

**Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Although Bosnia and Herzegovina is ranked among the highest in the region by World Press Freedom Index, this is primarily due to the world’s most liberal media freedom laws, but – as it was pertinently pointed out – the country is failing in implementation these laws. Therefore, the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina are as divided as the country itself, favoring not only the political and economic elites in Bosnia, but also enabling foreign influence to take advantage of the situation. There are two major public broadcasters on entity level – Radio-Television of the Federation of BiH (RT FBiH) and Radio-Television of Republika Srpska (RTRS) – and one national public broadcaster – Radio-Television of BiH (BHRT) – each of them expressing its own political ideology. Croats, as a third constitutional folk, are still deprived of having a major media service.

Through the influence on Bosniak political and social elites, Turkey has an indirect impact on media content construction and on the articulation of messages, aiming for an increased Turkish mainstream influence in Bosnia. The situation is favoring Turkish politicians over their Croatian or Serbian counterparts whose statements made on public media services – broadcasting from Sarajevo – is being connected with the demolition of state integrity. In Republika Srpska there is a strong Russian presence in the media (Sputnik), augmented by a pro-Russian government that is also shaping and controlling the local media (RTRS).

**Conclusion: Beyond Soft-Power**

The situation in the Western Balkans – complicated and burdened by mutual relations among the countries, as well as by a distant and unreachable European integration for the remaining candidates – is attracting the geopolitical interest of external actors whose goal is not always to resolve the existing state of affairs. The goal of this brief was to give a short overview of how the low level of media freedom in some Western Balkan countries serves for spreading the influence of external powers with a geopolitical stake in the region.

Thus, it can be concluded that the media freedom and foreign influence are in a relationship of mutual co-dependence. The external grasp on these countries could not have risen to such an extent if the media were truly free and independent in the Western Balkans. Also, there are two ways of influencing the media content: (a) directly – through ownership, (b) but also indirectly – by influencing the political elites that control the public media services in each Balkan country.

Furthermore, it can be concluded that the media under Russian ownership are likely to be more subjective and ideologically colored, but the media under EU-based or American control can also be used for political marketing and for the promotion of a certain strategic perspective. Therefore, the current situation of the media in the
Western Balkans is highly disturbing, the audience being lost in a sea of non-transparent, biased and controlled media – traditional and digital alike. Above all this, the media are being transformed into a platform for the competition of global actors over soft-power in this volatile, but geopolitically relevant region.

---

**Nani Klepo**, Guest Expert of **DAVA | Strategic Analysis**. She is a also a Project Associate at the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO) from Zagreb, within the Department for International and Political Relations.