

# Between Scylla and Charybdis – Public Service Broadcasters in the Western Balkans between Commercialization and Politicization

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## SUMMARY

*This paper identifies the main issues of public service broadcasters (PSBs) in six countries of the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia) in the period between 2010 and 2017, using a traditional literature review approach and document analysis. The analysis confirmed that PSBs in the region share the following (largely intertwined) issues: substantial financial problems; attempts to solve their difficult financial situations by competing with private commercial broadcasters, resulting in extensive broadcasting of entertainment content at the expense of public interest content; continuous pressure from state and political elites, resulting in editorial dependence and politically biased news content; problems adjusting to the new technological environment and delays in digitalization. These issues arise (also) from some common characteristics of the wider media and social context in the region, such as small advertising markets and potential, a lack of tradition in terms of independent countries and democracies, and positive perceptions of market forces and deregulation compared to political interference.*

Keywords: Public Service Broadcasters, Western Balkans, Media Systems, Media Sustainability, Media Independence, Political Culture, Commercialization, PSB, PSM, Broadcasting, Public Television, Public Radio.

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## Introduction

The role and state of *public service broadcasters* (PSBs) and its multi-platform version *public service media* (PSM—but since we refer to and quote previous research and authors, we will use the “legacy” acronym PSB) has been the topic of numerous studies and many policy documents and recommendations. Most of these emphasize the unclear position of PSB within the contemporary media environment, facing issues regarding “philosophical” aspects (*raison d’être* within transformations, the digitalization of society, the definitions of public role and public interest), financial aspects (the model of financing, the relationship between commercial and public aspects and content, and the role and impact of advertising), and political aspects (the independence of and relationship between PSBs and politics, governments, and civil society).

Besides the often discussed issues of political interference in PSB (see Muižnieks, 2017; Radu, 2018), particularly the political dependencies of PSBs in post-communist countries (see Jakubowicz, 2008; Rexha, 2016; Milosavljević & Poler, 2018), there is another danger, which “might even be more perilous to the survival of public service broadcasting and its underlying philosophy” (Voltmer, 2013: 25): a universal paradigm shift in public policy that regards market forces and deregulation as the ubiquitous solution for all problems, including those of public communication. Technological innovations during the 1980s coincided with the rise of neo-liberalism to global dominance, and both developments have pushed PSBs “to the margins of media policy across Europe” (Voltmer, 2013: 26). PSB principles have been facing challenges posed by convergence, digitalization and global media market pressures, and “the traditional role of PSBs as guardians of the public sphere, their impartiality and the quality of their programming is increasingly being undermined by the proliferation of multi-channel platforms, the progressive fragmentation of audiences and increased competition for revenues” (Brevini, 2013: 4). Therefore, gaining editorial and operational independence from the state is not the only challenge that some European PSBs face today: “adaptation to and evolution in digital environments is another one” (Muižnieks, 2017).

Our paper<sup>1</sup> focuses on six countries in the Western Balkans, using *traditional literature review* and *document analysis* to identify the key issues of PSBs in these coun-

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tries from 2010 to 2017. We assume that, in general, the issues PSB faces today in the Western Balkans are similar to those in other European countries, yet in this region they also involve specifics arising from different (media) traditions and (political) cultures.

### **Thinking Globally, Acting and Regulating Locally: Western Balkan Adaptations of General PSB Models**

Traditionally, PSBs in Europe have been expected to fulfill public interest obligations, such as universal coverage, diversity and quality of programming, appeal to minority groups, emphasis on local and national content, and commitment to impartial standards of journalism. Yet “each PSB system is developed according to its nation’s particular and unique set of historical, cultural and political traditions” (Brevini, 2013: 4). Therefore, before addressing our research question in detail, we must emphasize that each country has specific idiosyncratic characteristics, and thus it is important to avoid over-generalizations. The development of PSB in Eastern Europe has been affected to a great degree by the political culture of each individual society (Rupnik & Zielonka, 2013). This culture “defines attitudes toward political systems and their components, as well as toward orientations vis-à-vis different social objects or processes” (Brikse, 2010: 9), showing that different experiences with political cultures lead to different interpretations and implementations of overall European PSB traditions (ibid.).

In addition to these warnings about the specifics of different countries and their PSBs, Sükösd (2014) uses the concept of “multiple post-communisms” to describe the current status of political and media systems in former communist countries. Some of these countries can continue to be compared with Western Europe, but others, especially Hungary and Poland since taking a neo-authoritarian turn taken in recent years, have begun to bear more similarities with non-European countries, such as Russia and Turkey (Bajomi-Lázár, 2017: 14). Even within the Western Balkans, countries have had different histories, including recently, since the fall of socialism/communism:

- Only Albania existed before the fall of communism; the other Western Balkan countries were part of Yugoslavia and thus lacked independence and a long-term nation-state tradition;
- some countries became nation states in the first phase of transition at the beginning of 1990s, with a relatively peaceful transition (this includes Slovenia, another former Yugoslavian republic that was included in definitions of the Western Balkans until the early 2000s);

- some were involved in (lengthy) wars (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and armed conflicts (Kosovo);
- and some became independent states only recently (Montenegro in 2006).

History is also important in terms of developments and levels of freedom in different periods:

- Some of these countries had hard-line communist regimes until the fall of communism in the late 1980s (Albania);
- some were ruled by autocratic communist rulers even in the 1990s, although they were officially multi-party states (Serbia);
- some have had the same politician leading the country since 1991 (Montenegro, with Milo Đukanović who has ruled as either prime minister or president for the last 25 years);
- and some have regimes that are still highly controversial in terms of human rights and media freedom (Macedonia).

With regard to PSB, in some countries of the region the transition from state-controlled broadcasters to a public system has been described as more successful and with softer forms of media capture (Slovenia). Others have had different levels of success with this transition, some stepping back and forth regarding, for example, the political capture of its PSB (Croatia). This is to be expected considering the developments in the region within the last 25 years, which have included armed conflicts, and ethnic and religious tensions. According to Eckstein (1996: 10), such circumstances, which have brought highly discontinuous social change (rapid change, broad in scale), generally have pathological consequences. It is difficult to imagine a more discontinuous and conflict-generating process of social change than the all-embracing transition of post-Communist countries.

The Western Balkans as a region thus continues to differ in multiple ways from Western Europe. Key differences include smaller nation states, weaker industrialization, belated digitalization and internet penetration, fragile economies, and unconsolidated political systems with frequent political turbulence and/or violence (see, for example, Milosavljević, 2013 and 2014). However, Western Balkans countries also share a number of similarities with some Western European ones, particularly those in the southern part of Europe. These include: the weakness of press markets and the predominance of television over newspapers; the weakness of PSBs and the dominance of commercial broadcasters; and low levels of journalistic professionalization (Bajomi-Lázár, 2017: 14). Such factors have led to much criticism of the state of the media in these countries, including the (failure of) PSB (see, for example, Mungiu-Pippidi, 2003, or Jakobowitz, 2007).

## Methodology

In our paper, we address the following research question: *What have the key issues of PSBs been in Western Balkan countries?*

We analyzed PSBs in six countries of the Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia (see European Commission, 2017). First, we established the wider background of historical, political and economic circumstances in the establishment and functioning of national PSBs, and then used this as a basis for interpretation, and as a point from which to focus on the period between 2010 and 2017.

The first part of our research process consisted of *literature review*, to “make clear the theoretical context of the problem under investigation and how it has been studied by others” (Singleton & Straits, 2010: 576). In our study, we used the approach of *traditional literature review*, which is a written appraisal of existing knowledge on a topic with no prescribed methodology (see Jesson et al., 2011: 10). According to the authors (Jesson et al., 2011: 15), traditional review is often based on a personal selection of materials, because a researcher believes that the original authors have an important contribution to make to current knowledge. When selecting our literature, we paid particular attention to the following criteria for inclusion: the originality of the work, the quality of the information and evidence cited, and the quality of conclusions (see Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013: 124).

Our main method was *document analysis*, a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, which requires the data to be “examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” (Bowen, 2009: 27). We used a procedure that involves skimming, reading, and interpretation of the selected documents, and that combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis (Bowen, 2009: 32–33). In (qualitative) content analysis, we organized information into categories related to the central research question, and performed a first-pass document review in which meaningful and relevant passages of a document were identified; in thematic analysis, we recognized patterns within the data, with emerging themes becoming the categories for analysis, and then carried out a more focused re-reading and review of the data.

During document selection, we followed four criteria to evaluate quality: authenticity; credibility; representativeness; and meaning (see Scott, 1990). Documents that did not fulfill one or more of these criteria were excluded, such as the report “Mapping Digital Media: Montenegro”, which was removed from the Open Society Foundations website because of concerns over factual inaccuracies (see Open Society Foundations, 2012). The documents selected for our analysis included key regulatory and framework documents in each of the countries analyzed, with particular focus on the *lex specialis* of PSBs. This legal aspect was complemented and en-

hanced with key national research and analysis (such as – but not limited to – Mapping Digital Media, Analitika, SEE Media Observatory, Freedom House, and IREX Media Sustainability Index); the annual reports of the PSBs; the annual reports of different regulatory bodies and other key institutions involved in the work and framing of the national PSBs; different national media and cultural councils and bodies; and electronic media regulators. In this way, we could establish a network of key documents, opinions, and data/statistics regarding different aspects of PSBs in each country (their media role, their financial situation, their political position). This enabled us to identify the key dilemmas, obstacles, and issues identified and expressed by relevant stakeholders in each country, and to define key regional issues for the PSBs as specific institutions in specific environments.

## **Results**

Based on the traditional literature review approach and a detailed document analysis, we organized the data into categories relating to our research question, and identified patterns that allowed us to recognize the following (interconnected) issues of PSBs in the Western Balkans countries analyzed:

1. PSBs have been facing (substantial) financial problems, emerging mainly from the lack of sustainable funding, the inefficiency of license fee collection, small markets, and a lack of public awareness of their relevance.
2. PSBs have been trying to solve their difficult financial situations by competing with private commercial broadcasters, which has resulted in extensive broadcasting of entertainment content at the expense of public interest content.
3. PSBs have been continually pressured by state and political elites, despite their formal transition from state to public broadcasters, leading to editorial dependence and politically biased news content.
4. PSBs have had problems adjusting to the new technological environment, and have experienced delays in digitalization, mainly due to complicated (legal) procedures, internal structural problems, a lack of funds, a reluctance to prioritize or even discuss the issue, and the lack of an updated regulatory framework and flexible *lex specialis*, which would allow them to adapt to each new digital innovation and disruption.

### **Financial Problems of PSBs**

PSBs in the Western Balkans face (substantial) financial problems, linked to their small fragmented markets, their minor languages, the weak economies of their countries, a lack of sustainable funding, and inefficient license fee collection (see

Milosavljević & Poler, 2018). However, the system of financing PSBs is “of utmost importance since it has the potential of keeping them politically dependent” (Muižnieks, 2017).

In Albania, the media market is “weak, small and fragmented” (Bino, 2017). The public service broadcaster *Radio and Television of Albania* (RTSH) is funded by the license fee, public funding from the government, and from private sources such as advertising (ibid.). RTSH receives 70 percent of its funding from the television tax and has more staff than the private channels, yet it has the lowest ratings, as cited by IREX (2017: 9). The main concerns are RTSH’s efficiency and the mismanagement of its budget (see Bino, 2017). An almost insignificant share of the advertising market, inefficient collection of license fees, and decreased funding from the state budget have put financial pressure on RTSH, and have slowed its digital switchover (see Bino & Kadia, 2017: 38). Competition with commercial stations, financial inadequacies, and a legacy of culture and programs produced before the 1990s prevent the airing of higher quality content (Londo, 2013: 45).

PSB in Bosnia and Herzegovina, consisting of three public services, is complicated and non-sustainable (Tešanović, 2014: 10). PSB has never actually become economically sustainable and truly independent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as revenues collected through subscription have always been insufficient. This made PSB “an easy target for the control and influence by various interest groups” (Tadić Mijović & Šajkaš, 2016: 5). The system is severely damaged by the current license fee collection process, which is becoming increasingly inefficient as political interference continues (IREX, 2017: 16). In March 2016, for example, BHRT (the state-level public broadcaster) announced that it would cease broadcasting by the end of June 2016, as a direct consequence of its aggravating financial crunch; the decision was later postponed, but a solution for the continuing commercial struggles of PSBs has still not been found (IREX, 2017: 19). All three PSBs continued to struggle financially in 2017, especially BHRT, where decreased TV subscription tax collections, over-hiring, poor management, and the debts of entity-level broadcasters have plagued the outlet for years (Jahić, 2018: 9). BHRT continued broadcasting in 2017, despite earlier announcements of a possible shutdown (IREX, 2018: 19). In addition to economic non-sustainability, the decision to have three public broadcasters, each serving one of the ethnic groups, is likely a social mistake (Voltmer, 2013: 25), because in countries “that emerge from ethnic conflict the separation of communication channels will only further divide and polarise the society” (ibid.).

The public service broadcaster in Kosovo, *Radio Television of Kosovo* (RTK) was established in 1999 through a comprehensive international assistance program. Its financial situation grew increasingly vulnerable after the handover from international management to local ownership, and particularly after 2009, when the license



fee paid by all TV-owning households was suspended and RTK became fully dependent on state funding (see Miftari, 2016). Each year, RTK is allocated around €10 million from the state budget in addition to the revenue it generates through marketing, and although the law says that government funding is only a temporary mechanism, no subscription mechanism has yet been found (IREX, 2017: 56) and in 2017, RTK continued to receive state funding (IREX, 2018: 61). RTK has experienced a decline in ratings over the years, but still has primacy regarding news bulletins, and its prime-time news broadcast attracts high ratings; however, according to Miftari (2017: 22) it faces strong competition from commercial television channels, which carry Latin American and Turkish soap operas and other entertainment programs.

The public service broadcaster in Macedonia, *Macedonian Radio and Television* (MRT), has also been experiencing a funding crisis (Belicanec & Rieliev, 2012: 27). Pressures from commercial media have presented a great challenge, and despite being financed through the broadcasting tax and restricted in advertising during prime time, MRT has been subject to market pressures and has gradually lost its audience share (Trpevska & Micevski, 2017: 21). PSB in Macedonia has had financial and organizational problems for many years, and this has “generated a profound production-technological crisis resulting in the decline of the audience and erosion of its media identity” (Trpevska & Micevski, 2014: 294). In 2017, according to the Freedom House Country Report, the government released draft amendments to the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, among which is one that increases the annual budget of the PSB (Bliznakovski, 2018: 11). The broadcasting fee was removed in 2017, and the fact that MRT will now be financed from the state budget means, according to IREX panelists, that “the PBS, which has traditionally been underfinanced, will now receive even less money” (IREX, 2018: 71).

The media market in Montenegro is among the smallest in the region, yet it has a large number of media services operating within it. In such circumstances, media companies cannot sustain themselves with advertising alone (Ružić, 2017: 34). *Radio Television of Montenegro* (RTCG), which was established as a PSB in 2002, has not undergone significant changes to date, despite legislative and regulatory changes and media reforms; among RTCG’s persistent problems have been financial losses, state funding, state influence on editorial policy, a surplus of employees, outdated equipment, and delays in digitalization (Ružić, 2017: 24–25). RTCG uses various sources of financing prescribed by the Law on Electronic Media and the Law on Public Broadcasting Services of Montenegro, yet funds gained from the Budget of Montenegro “are not sufficient for the sustainability of the public service” (Ružić, 2017: 35). “Given the unfavourable situation regarding funding, it does not come as a surprise that *RTCG* has major financial problems,” concludes Ružić (2017: 36).



In Serbia, the concept of PSB was defined in 2002 by the Broadcasting Law, which stipulated the transformation of the state-run broadcaster into two equal public broadcasters—a national one (*Radio Television of Serbia*, or RTS) and a provincial one (*Radio Television of Vojvodina*, or RTV). In 2013 it became obvious that the institution of PSB in Serbia was in crisis: both broadcasters were on the verge of financial collapse (Matić & Valić Nedeljković, 2014). According to Marko (2017: 39), funding is the core problem for PSB in Serbia. Since 2002, the license fee model of funding has been widely criticized. Some critics were politically motivated, while some targeted the way this model was implemented, linking it with poor outcomes, i.e. a constant decrease in the number of those paying it (ibid.). In 2014, the license fee was abolished due to its low collection rate, and was replaced with budget funding. A tax was again introduced at the beginning of 2016, but with no proper legal basis and no mechanism to make its collection more successful (Marko, 2017: 42).

### **Entertainment at the Expense of the Public Interest**

The commercialization of PSBs in the Western Balkans is evident in their program schedules, which offer various entertainment formats that are similar to those of their commercial competitors.

In recent years, Albania's RTSH has increased its programming significantly in terms of topics related to education, entertainment, sports, culture and socio-economic and international rather than political and current affairs. It is also the only mainstream media outlet that produces programs for ethnic-national and linguistic minorities in Albania (Bino & Kadia, 2017: 36). Thus we can conclude that RTSH has shown some progress in its efforts to offer newscasts for people with disabilities, and to broadcast some of its programs in Greek and Macedonian for ethnic minorities (Londo, 2012: 29–30). It has attempted to fulfill part of its legal requirements, and the general obligation to produce programs that are of interest to all social groups, ages, religions, and ethnic backgrounds, including programs for children, and programs on education, agriculture, and social topics. (Londo, 2013: 45). However, despite these achievements, RTSH has been constantly criticized for the poor quality of its programs (Sulce, 2016: 17), as it has been “increasingly turning to program formats that are characteristic of commercial TV stations” (Londo, 2013: 45).

One of the major problems for PSB in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been an “excessive commercialisation of content” (Hodžić, 2014: 158). PSBs have been challenged by an emergent competition from commercial media (Isanović, 2008), and even though they still have the leading role in news provision, “growing competi-

tion has resulted in overt commercialization of their output” (Džihana et al., 2012: 7). PSB has a legal obligation to balance information and entertainment programs, yet entertainment programs have taken a prominent role, particularly on *Radio-Television of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (RTVFBiH), according to the Media Sustainability Index (IREX, 2016b: 22). Program profile analyses reveal the growing presence of entertainment, while other genres remain underrepresented and marginalized (Isanović, 2008). According to Ahmetašević and Hadžiristić (2017: 328), there is an ongoing debate about whether the PSBs adequately reflect the ethnic structure of the country, and some reports suggest that they also fall short in fulfilling their obligations regarding adequate representation of other populations and national minorities, especially ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities.

The available research on the content of PSB in Kosovo is scarce. However, all media in Kosovo face similar obstacles and troubles to those of other media in the region: state intervention, financial dependence on government agencies and advertisers close to the government, service to political parties, and the commercialization of content (see Krasniqi, 2010: 9).

MRT’s financial dependence on the state has increased over the past decade, “which [has] resulted in its diverging from the fundamental role of a public service broadcaster – protection of the public interest” (Nikodinoska & Grozdanovska-Dimiškovska, 2015: 12). In Macedonia, entertainment occupies more than half of the program structure of TV channels MTV1 and MTV2, while education and information are minority genres; the first public radio channel (MR1) broadcasts predominantly information, but the second one (MR2) is mostly entertainment (Belicanec & Rieliev, 2012: 26). A series of research studies conducted by the School of Journalism and Public Relations between 2011 and 2013 revealed that Macedonian PSB programming disregards the public interest (Trpevska & Micevski, 2014: 295–296), and the general public has continuously criticized the performance of MRT. A report by the Broadcasting Council in 2010 confirmed that public criticism is grounded in the fact that “entertainment is predominant on the first and second channel of MRT ... open debates are lacking ... important topics remain insufficiently covered due to inconsistent editorial policy and the program is not a reference point for the public” (Belicanec & Rieliev, 2012: 30).

Montenegro’s RTCG has also been criticized for broadcasting content inappropriate for a PSB (Perović-Korać, 2014; Ružić, 2017: 44). According to Goran Đurović, a member of the RTCG Council (in Ružić, 2017: 44), popular programs, such as *Women from Dedinje*, *Suleiman the Magnificent* and *My Kitchen*, have nothing to do with PSB goals. Airings of various types of reality show “represent a shift towards the commercial broadcaster market and an effort to raise the ratings of the public service” (Ružić, 2017: 44). According to some interviewees cited by Ružić (ibid.),

RTCG has been “commercialized to a worrying extent”, and such content takes precedence over what the primary task of a PSB should be. The financial reports of the PSB show that RTCG allocates large amounts of funding to purchasing films and the rights to broadcast sports programs (Ružić, 2017: 45), while leaving representatives of minority communities dissatisfied with their representation, and airing only a few educational programs (Ružić, 2017: 44).

The editorial policies of Serbia’s RTS and RTV have also garnered much criticism, according to Marko (2017: 39). Part of this criticism has been directed at their commercialized and sensationalized content, such as popular TV series, reality shows, sports, and entertainment. There are serious concerns that RTS “has commercialized its output in order to enhance its ratings – for example, by introducing reality and quiz show formats – meaning that public opinion feels that these ways of increasing income are not suitable for the public service broadcaster” (Surčulija et al., 2011: 29). Namely, besides following the trend of other commercial broadcasters by airing reality shows and other entertainment formats, it has intensified its commercial activities by, for example, featuring commercial sponsors during the sports segment of the national news (Surčulija et al., 2011: 26). The former management has defended this policy, claiming that it helped build the most popular TV station in Serbia, while some media experts, researchers, and professionals from media associations pointed out that PSB should not compete with commercial broadcasters, but rather cover a range of topics, genres and issues, including children’s programs, documentary programs, and programs in minority languages (Marko, 2017: 39). The provincial broadcaster RTV, however, has an emphasized role in representing diversities with a special focus on national minorities (Marko, 2017: 22).

### **Political Pressures and Lack of Editorial Independence**

As stated in the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Public Service Media Governance (Council of Europe, 2012), the transition from state to public service “has yet to be successfully completed in many Council of Europe member States”. The Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe (Muižnieks, 2017) mentioned several examples demonstrating that “governments’ attempts to turn public broadcasting into government broadcasting remain widespread”. Despite being transformed into public service media on a formal level, the formerly state-run media have been quickly taken over by political elites, which “gave rise to a specific form of party domination within media, where the governing, managing and editorial positions were reserved for personnel loyal to those in power” (Petković et al., 2016: 3). One of the main issues of PSB in the countries analyzed is thus its vulnerability to political interference. As Voltmer highlights, in many new European post-communist democracies, “public service

has been hijacked by political elites to serve their needs of controlling the public agenda” (Voltmer, 2013: 25), and in many cases, a majoritarian approach to appointing editorial and supervisory bodies of PSBs has been taken as “an invitation to the government in power to manipulate the operation and performance of the institution” (ibid.).

The independence of Albania’s RTSH from political and/or corporate influences has been a serious cause of concern and a constant source of debate, according to Londo (2012: 29). As Bino (2017) points out, it is “naïve at best to assume that RTSH can be detached from politics in a country like Albania, with its high level of politicization and continued confrontation between political parties”. Sulce (2016: 17) concluded that state-financed RTSH (IREX, 2016a: 10), established as a propaganda tool of the communist regime, has failed to become a public institution despite several efforts by foreign and national actors. As cited by the Media Sustainability Index, “the broadcasting of government success clearly consumes the bulk of news programming, and bias in favor of every incumbent government is also evident” (IREX, 2016a: 11). The news service on the Albanian public television broadcaster TVSH has been criticized continuously, “mainly on the grounds of a lack of editorial independence and open support for the Government” (Londo, 2012: 25). The panelists at IREX in 2017 questioned the independence of RTSH and its relevance to Albanians (IREX, 2017: 7). However, a year later they noted some efforts were being made to improve the quality of its news programming (IREX, 2018: 9), pointing out that the 2017 election was the first in which media monitors gave RTSH positive marks for its coverage (IREX, 2018: 8).

The independence of the three PSBs in Bosnia and Herzegovina is formally ensured, but politicization continues to tarnish appointments to managerial positions, according to the Media Sustainability Index (IREX, 2016b: 20). In 2016, political interference in PSBs continued, as the political interests of the parties in power interfered with crucial decisions and leadership of PSBs (IREX, 2017: 19). PSB in Bosnia and Herzegovina has actually never been economically sustainable and truly independent; revenues collected through subscription have been insufficient, “[making] PSB an easy target for the control and influence by various interest groups” (Tadić Mijović & Šajkaš, 2016: 5). According to Ahmetašević and Hadžiristić (2017: 36), institutional instability and financial woes leave the PSB system “vulnerable to direct political interference when it comes to the appointment of managing boards, editors and even journalists”. The Freedom House Country Report for 2017 found that all three PSBs “experienced heavy political influence and often acted as mouthpieces for political parties” (Jahić, 2018: 10).

The political powers in Kosovo have used the law as an instrument to exert influence on the two main parameters influencing PSB’s editorial independence: “the

manner of financing and the election of the medium's Board" (Rexha, 2016: 1). A growing dependence on the state budget has begun to erode RTK's editorial independence and credibility, according to Miftari (2016), who also stressed that in the conditions of a nascent democracy such as Kosovo it seems difficult or even impossible "to have a politically independent public broadcasting system that is fully dependent on the state budget" (ibid.). The panelists at IREX believed that "direct state funding is the main hindrance to full editorial and institutional independence" of RTK (IREX, 2017: 56). Attempts to reform RTK continued to stall during 2017, due to disagreements about a financing model that would result in RTK not being funded predominantly from the state budget (Group for Legal and Political Studies, 2018: 10).

The Macedonian PSB faces pressures of political authoritarianism, according to Trpevska and Micevski (2017: 53). This crisis of many decades was induced by political influences, clientelistic ties, financial shortages and technological deficiencies, which have placed journalists and editors under immense pressure from political and business elites (Trpevska & Micevski, 2014: 295–296). A series of research studies between 2011 and 2013 established that PSB programming pertains to the interests of the Government or to the parties occupying it (ibid.). Research conducted by the Institute for Communication Studies showed that the two public TV channels (MTV1 and MTV2) "have turned the news into a mouthpiece of the leading parties" (Trpevska & Micevski, 2017: 32). According to the panelists at IREX, the systems and procedures for appointing members of MRT's Programming Council allow the government to circumvent the law, ensuring strong control over its programs (IREX, 2017: 66). Nominations for the Programming Council are typically from groups reliant on government funding, and the same is true of appointments for top editorial positions (ibid.). The removal of the broadcasting fee in 2017 and the financing of MRT from the state budget raise "legitimate concerns that the new financing model may further undermine its editorial independence" (IREX, 2018: 71).

The media landscape in Montenegro is in general deeply and widely politicized, revealing a sharp division between "supporters" and "critics" of state policies that has become more pronounced in recent years, according to Vujosevic and Vuckovic (2015: 6). The transformation of Montenegro's RTCG into a PSB, initiated in 2002, was interrupted in 2008, when citizen subscriptions were replaced by direct funding from the state budget. This meant that the parliament elected board members, where it previously only ratified their election by various civic organizations and public institutions (Tadić Mijović & Šajkaš, 2016: 8). In 2016, negative trends in the media sector in Montenegro persisted, and according to IREX (2017: 77) the public media supported Montenegrin authorities "nearly unequivocally". In 2017, after almost three decades of control by the ruling DPS, RTCG management asserted greater

independence from the party with the support of its Council (board), according to Baća and Morrison (2018). RTCG appointed a new director in March, yet in October the government attempted to wrest control back from the Council, through an investigation by the Agency for Prevention of Corruption (ASK) into board members' alleged conflicts of interest. The government succeeded in dismissing two members of the RTCG Council and one member of the Agency for Electronic Media (AEM) (*ibid.*).

In Serbia, according to Matić and Valić Nedeljković (2014: 349–350), the transformation of the former state television station into a PSB did not result in politically neutral news coverage. Among the main problems for this PSB have been a deficient legal concept, a lack of financial sustainability as the basis for financial and editorial independence, and non-transparent management that bowed to political pressure (Matić & Valić Nedeljković, 2014: 363). In 2011, the Anti-Corruption Council of Serbia found that clientelistic relations existed between the management of RTS and the political and business ruling elite; such relations were especially noticeable in arbitrary decisions on purchases of independent production programming (Mihajlov Prokopović & Vulić, 2015: 1575–1576). According to the Freedom House Country Report, the media's independence in Serbia in general remained under pressure from the government throughout 2017 (Damjanović, 2018: 9).

### **Problems of Adjusting to the New Technological Environment and Delayed Digitalization**

One of the existential threats that PSBs in the Western Balkans have been facing is their failure “to adjust to the new technological environment and redefine their structure, operation, and services in line with consumption habits and preferences of the audience” (Marko, 2016). PSBs in the region mostly still operate in an outdated traditional PSB paradigm, and have not evolved into public service media (PSM) or embraced mobile technologies, internet platforms, and interactive content adjusted to increasingly fragmented audiences.

According to IREX (2018: 6), Albania's switchover to digital broadcasting gathered momentum in 2017 after a long period of stagnation in which symbiotic and intertwined relations between business, politics and media affected the process negatively (Bino & Kadia, 2017: 41). The factors that have hindered the process are: complex business interests and pressures; the questionable independence of the regulatory body and its failure to ensure the necessary balances; legal disputes; and the slowness of PSB digitalization (Bino & Kadia, 2017: 42). RTSH was assigned the role of “engine” in the digitalization process (Bino & Kadia, 2017: 43), yet in light of political and other powerful interferences, it has not adhered to this role



(Bino & Kadia, 2017: 44). Even though RTSH made attempts to incorporate the new logistics and platforms offered by ICTs, the process of adapting to the new technological environment is still lagging behind (Bino & Kadia, 2017: 47).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the digital switchover process has not yet been completed, mainly due to a complicated bureaucratic apparatus and a lack of prioritization (Ahmetašević & Hadžiristić, 2017: 39). Digital signals were tested in October 2016, but only in Sarajevo, Banja Luka, and Mostar, leaving six other areas for the second phase (IREX, 2018: 28). Although the Strategy on Digital Switch-Over was adopted in 2009, its implementation has been delayed for years. Some structural problems within the PSBs also slowed digitalization significantly (for more, see Ahmetašević & Hadžiristić, 2017: 40–41), and in addition, “the failure of digitalization was the collateral damage of dysfunctional public institutions” (ibid.). According to IREX (2018: 28), officials announced that digitalization would be finalized by the end of 2017, but it has again been postponed. PSBs in Bosnia and Herzegovina mainly rely on the idea of a traditional public, and continue to use the traditional channels (Ahmetašević & Hadžiristić, 2017: 42). They are not organizationally equipped for digital production, and do not use mobile platforms and social media effectively (Ahmetašević & Hadžiristić, 2017: 46).

Kosovo is still in the infant stages of transitioning to digital transmission; the deadline of June 2015 was not met, partly because of political challenges, and also because digitalization in Kosovo has crossborder implications with Serbia, according to Miftari (2017: 38). The process has also been controversial and problematic because of insufficient funding, a lack of broadcaster capacity and expertise, and inadequate understanding and attention from the state (Berisha, 2015). The mandate to draft a strategy for the transfer was given to an Independent Media Commission (IMC), yet the Law on Digitalization was approved in 2015, before the digitalization strategy was drafted. In the absence of an approved strategy, questions remain regarding the timeframe for the switchover, and who will bear its costs. These delays have left RTK’s digitalization process pending (Miftari, 2017: 39), and in 2017 no concrete steps were taken regarding the transition to digital broadcasting (IREX, 2018: 61). There has not been much debate in Kosovo about RTK’s introduction of new media content, its use of social media websites and live streaming, or its role in a multichannel environment (Miftari, 2017: 40). RTK has taken some steps toward upgrading its online presence and improving its online appeal, but while the central question of funding its core traditional operations remains pending, it seems unlikely that it will direct its energy to upgrading them further (Miftari, 2017: 46).

The digital switchover process in Macedonia was completed in May 2013, a year later than originally planned (Trpevska & Micevski, 2017: 37). Although digital transmission has created more possibilities for PSB, MRT still broadcasts the same



three TV services as it did in the analogue environment, and there is no public document outlining its plans for developing new digital services (Trpevska & Micevski, 2017: 397). MRT uses the internet and social media to disseminate news and information produced by its newsroom (Trpevska & Micevski, 2017: 39), but most current debates “have been focused on its political bias and dependence on the government, putting the issue of the implications of new technologies in a secondary position” (ibid.).

Montenegrin media has belatedly followed trends in technical innovation, and developments in the domain of program distribution and production, according to Ružić (2017: 38). Montenegro officially switched to a digital signal in June 2015, after a digitalization process that began in 2009, and for which the country received significant EU assistance (Ružić, 2017: 39). Since 2012, RTCG has been trying to catch up with the modernization process by buying up-to-date equipment, but it struggles with technical problems, and the PSB digitalization process will be carried out in several phases (Ružić, 2017: 41–42). According to IREX (2018: 90), PSB was still transitioning to digital transmission in 2017, when the leading private broadcasters had already achieved it. A year later, it was confirmed that all leading television media companies had made the switch (IREX, 2018: 90). Regarding adaptation to the new technological environment, Ružić (2017: 42) mentioned the RTCG’s use of new platforms to communicate its contents.

Serbia completed the process of transitioning to a digital signal in June 2015, but not without numerous inconsistencies and politically-motivated obstacles (for more, see Marko, 2017: 32). According to the 2009 Strategy for Digital Switchover, PSBs were to play an important role in the public campaign about the digitalization process (Marko, 2017: 33). The convergence of services and products provided by the PSB in the digitalization era have not been widely discussed in Serbia, and debates on digitalization and strategic documents have mainly been linked to the digital switchover and its technical aspects, “without providing any vision of the future development of the media sector, including public media, using the possibilities that digitalization creates” (Marko, 2017: 40). Regarding these new possibilities, Marko (2017: 35) exposes the use of social media at RTS and RTV.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Our analysis confirmed that PSBs in the Western Balkans share a number of (largely intertwined) issues, particularly financial problems, commercialization, politicization, and delayed adjustment to the new technological environment. These issues have arisen partly from some common characteristics of the wider media and social context in the region, among them particularly small advertising markets and poten-

tial, a lack of tradition in terms of the independence of countries and their democracies, and positive perceptions of market capture compared to the political aspects.

All Western Balkans countries face significant limitations regarding population size and thus the potential amount collected from license fees or advertising income. According to advertisers (e.g. Erbežnik, 2013), the market is so small that the economy of scope does not function. The potential and strength of these markets (or populations) is the main impediment to the economic strength of these PSBs.

The fundamental difference between the systems in the “West” and the “East” is also in the fact that East-Central European societies, including the Western Balkans, have never experienced political democracy in any full sense. As Splichal wrote, “With the partial exception of Poland which has been often split between Austria, Russia and Prussia, they represented for centuries stateless nations, although with different degrees of autonomy: Bulgarians, Romanians, Serbs and Montenegrins until the fall of the Ottoman Empire, following the war between Russia and Turkey; Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenians and Croatians until the end of the First World War and the fall of Austro-Hungarian Monarchy” (1993: 27). Some of the countries are even mentioned as typical examples of “Vanished Kingdoms”, countries in Europe that existed for a certain period within the previous centuries, and then disappeared. Such is the case with Montenegro (Davies, 2012). These historical and political circumstances add to the wider issues of democratic traditions and the traditions of democratic institutions, including independent media and PSBs, leading to a conceptual misunderstanding of PSBs and its traditions and specifics.

Furthermore, after decades of non-market state-controlled economy and state-controlled media, the initial period after democratic change in the Western Balkans was characterized by a strong belief that freedom of ownership, particularly private ownership, would guarantee democracy and freedom of the press. Privatization was seen as the only instrument with which to reduce and possibly abolish state intervention in the media (Splichal, 1993: 32). The media’s commercial motives were thus often regarded as limiting state penetration, without unfavorable consequences (Splichal, 1993: 18).

In post-communist countries, lawmakers proceeded from an assumption that only the state could endanger pluralism in the media sphere, with its particular/non-plural political interest. But the present situation contains a number of examples of limitations in the media that are driven by economic/market interest. The main argument for economic deregulation is that the market has inner mechanisms that guarantee media pluralism. This was certainly the case in the former state, where the absence of a market economy made the media politically dependent. But this argument cannot be applied to the opposite situation: a market economy cannot support media autonomy. In reality, the market “supports” different media as long as they are profitable (see Milosavljević & Bašić-Hrvatini, 2000).

It is only in the last decade that the perception of market capture having only positive consequences is changing. After twenty years of press freedom and the construction of civil society on one hand, and the growing pressures of the capitalist market on the other, it has become obvious that the professional decisions of journalists depend increasingly on the interests of their employers, which “is reflected in the growing degree of self-censorship” (Lauk, 2008: 197), showing important threats from commercial market influences and pressure on the media. This is the case with PSBs in the Western Balkans, where commercial interests can lead to commercially-led editorial decisions.

Our findings on the main issues that PSBs in the Western Balkans are facing today are in line with the three existential threats that Marko (2016) identifies: the political colonization and instrumentalization of PSBs; a broken funding model; and the failure of PSBs to adjust to new technological trends. “If PSB is to survive, significant changes must be introduced regarding the way how it is governed and funded and how it is positioned in the digital media environment”, Marko (2016) argues, recommending the following:

- New models of funding must be introduced, securing adequate financial resources and eliminating the possibility of political interference.
- PSBs’ finances must be made fully transparent, and mechanisms of public control over their financial operations should be introduced and enforced.
- More accountable management is needed, restructuring PSB governance to ensure more efficient control over its operations by citizens, to reduce political interference, and to make decision-making procedures more transparent.
- Despite operating in an era of fragmented audiences, PSB should preserve its function of being universal in reach, yet find a balance between this and more personalized and specialized content.
- PSB should follow high quality standards, production excellence, and promote ethical values.
- PSB should reflect the diversity of the society in which it operates.
- PSB should finally start transitioning from classic broadcasters to PSM, thus becoming engines of innovation in the use of new technologies, the introduction of new formats and services, and the forging of new forms of engagement with citizens.

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