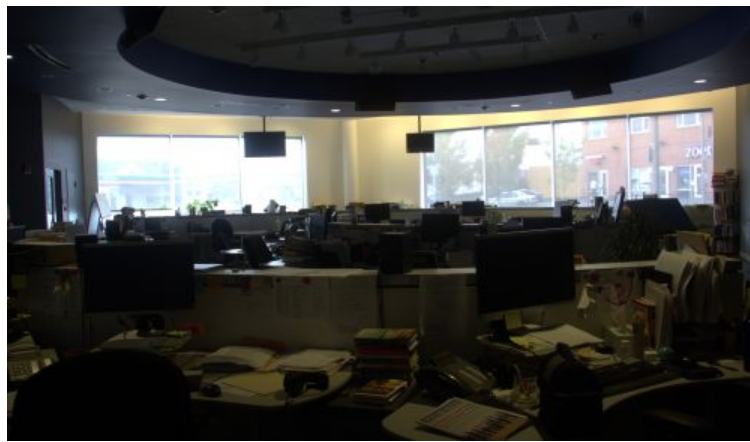


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# Public service media, a political battlefield in South East Europe- A regional summary

Sándor Orbán Borbala Toth Thu, 2013-10-31 16:27



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The main findings of the flash reports produced by the Media Observatory research team in the realm of public service media in the SEE region.

*When it comes to public service broadcasting in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia, and Serbia no one can see a fully-fledged BBC-ian ethos. Instead, similar factors characterise the operation of the national or regional public service broadcasters (PSB) which hinder their proper functioning, such as non-transparency, funding difficulties, and politically biased coverage. At the same time, low audience share and public trust, dismissal of journalists and editors can be witnessed in all of these countries. These are the main findings of the flash reports produced by the Media Observatory research team when analyzing current trends and developments in the realm of public service media in the SEE region.*

As Snezana Trpevska, the author of the Macedonian report put it upon the difficulties of the transformation of the Macedonian Radio Television from state to public service: "The European democratic model in broadcasting was «transplanted» in Macedonia, while patterns of behavior that were the result of the social consciousness and political culture inherited from the old system functioned in reality." Traces of patterns can be found in the SEE region with various types of difficulties prevailing. One of them is the lack of public interests in their operation.

### Audience share, public trust

Albania's PSB, RTSH is assessed to have negative popularity, even though there is no public data on media outlets' audience. The audience share of the Croat HRT has been declining since 2005, while the audience shares of PSBs in Hungary have been traditionally low. This phenomenon might be attributed to the low public trust.

In Croatia, "all too frequent changes in HRT's editorial sector, as well as a number of recent scandals that foster the public perception of the public service as politically influenced (if not controlled) and manipulated by its own management (primarily in terms of bypassing regular and transparent procedures), have contributed to further decline in public trust in the Croatian PSB" – reported Davor Glavaš.



## FLASH REPORTS 5: REGIONAL OVERVIEW

Media advertising in South-East Europe: burdened with unscrupulous promotion of business and political interests.

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Sanela Hodžić stated that “doubts about the editorial independence and the performance of the public broadcasters in Bosnia and Herzegovina are not new.” Other countries are no different. The level of public trust in Hungary has been decreasing in the public service media since the democratic transition.

Despite financially stabilizing the Macedonian PSB by a more successful collection of licence fees, the public trust is still lacking: “the news and current affairs programs were under the influence of the political structures of power for many years, so the confidence of the public in their independence and impartiality, was almost entirely lost” – cited Trpevska. One way to ensure independence from stakeholders could be the independent management and regulatory bodies. However, mostly this is not the case despite the legal environment. Instead, there are (sometimes incomplete) boards, whose members are vulnerable to the parliamentary majority of the day.

### **Governance and regulatory bodies**

There are legal means ensuring independence of the management and oversight of the Macedonian PSB, but – as Trpevska put it – “almost all executive directors in MRTV in the period after 2005 were people close to one or another authority.”

The SEE region's PSBs' regulatory bodies seem to be dysfunctional in terms of independence. The Albanian regulatory bodies experience political pressure, while in the RTSH itself there is weak editorial independence. The nomination of the Steering Council, the regulatory and governing body of RTSH has been thwarting the proper operation of the television, which was not solved by the new law on audiovisual media accepted with consensus in 2013. The election process of the Council has been constantly changing throughout the years, making it overpoliticized. “Long periods of political tension and disagreement have led to situations where the Steering Council has been either incomplete or working without a mandate” – wrote Ilda Londo.

According to Jovanka Matić, Serbia's media legislation “does not allow for an insight into neither financial nor program-related decision of public broadcasters.” The regulatory body merely monitors the share of domestic programmes in the total air time, while the management boards only approves the operational decisions of the manager.

Croatia's new act on public television (dismissing the previous one consensually accepted merely two years ago) enables the simple parliamentary majority to appoint and dismiss managerial and governing bodies of the PSB, which raises concerns about its independence.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, RTVFBiH's board of governors was to be appointed after relieving the previous board and establishing an interim one accusing poor business results of the PSB, despite the fact that the process was illegal. After the immense reaction of NGOs, the media and the international community, the interim board was abandoned leaving the situation unresolved. In Bosnia and Herzegovina it is believed that not the best candidates are appointed as members of the boards of the PSBs, but national and political criteria are at stake. As journalist Zija Dizdarević put it: the members of the boards are mostly “incompetent people, who are acting (or not acting) the way they are instructed by political parties.” Furthermore, there is no mechanism of monitoring the performance of the boards, thus ignoring their tasks enjoy impunity.

Hungary's “Media Council, the main decision-making body of the National Media and Infocommunications Authority's (NMHH) is a one-party body, as its members have been nominated by the governing party only” – wrote Borbala Toth. This body is practically heading the PBSs, as according to the new media regulation, all of them were united under one single entity. Such dysfunctional regulatory and overseeing bodies tend to lead to biased coverage.

### **Biased coverage**

In Hungary, former head of the national wireless agency admitted in a 2010 interview that “a public service media outlet has to be loyal to the government and fair to the opposition.” There were several cases of manipulation of news on the PSB, and tendencies of censorship and self-censorship were also reported. Also, during the overhaul of the public service media, journalists, editors and other professionals were dismissed in Hungary. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, in February 2012, “instructions on how to report on SDP were given by the leader of SDP to a journalist of a news program of FTV” – wrote Hodžić.

The editorial independence of Albania's RTSH “has always been disputable,” as Londo put it. As Th. Goga notes, “The state media, which are not yet truly public, are completely partisan, a permanent client of every ruling majority, and do not serve the public interest.” During the 2013 election campaign, the news coverage attributed a more positive tone towards the ruling party and the government.

In Croatia, “recent changes in key editorial positions at news programmes (...) have been perceived by the general public as a result and a direct consequence of political will (in this case that of the Prime Minister) which bypassed the regular procedure” – wrote Glavaš. “Provisions on production outsourcing and contracting independent program producers are also largely seen as non-transparent and open to different types of financial and procedural manipulations” – he concluded.

Trpevska assessed that in Macedonia “no government in recent years has been ready to give up its influence in MRTV, either by covert or open targeting of the work of the leadership structures or by financial pressure.” She continued: the PSB’s coverage of the Macedonian local elections could be considered as an example: it reported about “investments, infrastructural buildings, investments in industrial zones (...) In the last ten days of the campaign, the informative function of the public service broadcaster was almost entirely obedient to the ruling party.”

### **Funding and (non-)transparency**

Albania’s RTSH receives most of its funds from the licence fee, but also from advertising and the state budget. However, the collection of the licence fee is found to be problematic, as it is collected via the electricity bill, but the electricity payment rate is poor, and the electricity company tends to fail in passing the amount to RTSH, which for instance in 2012 got only 30% of the payments it should have got.

In Serbia, in terms of financing the PSB, the government arrived at crossroads in the summer of 2013, namely, whether direct government financial control should prevail or the financing should be collected through the licence fees – apart from the revenues coming from advertisements. The two PSBs, national RTS and regional RTV have been operating with losses over the years. The general manager of RTS has been warning the government about the financial instability of RTS for years. The outcry was caused by a decrease in the collection of the subscription fee (which is 5 euros per month) caused by the economic crisis and the decrease in citizens’ salaries. “The subscription collection rate indeed dropped in the last years, from about 70% in 2006 to about 30% in 2012” – Matic cited data of RTS, adding that “almost nothing is transparent in the way RTS gets revenues, even less about the way they are spend.” Indeed, the general manager of RTS rather paid the penalty for not providing data on the financial operations. Also, there are rumours about misuse of funds in RTS, but due to the lack of data, it cannot be proven. According to officials, Serbia’s RTS has 3250 employees, 1000 out of them is a surplus. Dismissing them is not an option, as funds are lacking for their compensation, and it is allegedly cheaper to pay their salaries.

In Croatia, HRT is financed from licence fees (10.5 euros per month), advertisements and funds allocated from the state budget to produce programmes for Croats living abroad. The licence fee makes up almost 85% of the total budget, while the revenues from advertisements have been decreasing since 2008, and currently is around 11% of the total budget. Despite the fact that the licence fee collection rate is the highest in the region with 96%, HRT “is in a financial turmoil and gross debts to the state budget (taxes) which makes it vulnerable to political pressure.” The developed situation is due to the “utterly inefficient and non-transparent business management.” Croatia’s HRT has over 3400 full-time employees apart from the 3700 part-time employees and contributors, while analysts claim that a total 3000 employees would be the adequate number for the current production.

The Macedonian system for collecting the licence fee has made the situation of MRTV financially unstable, funds were needed to be allocated from the state budget, which was a form of pressure. Nevertheless, in 2011 and 2012, the collection of the fee was more successful.

Preparation to the digital switchover in Albania has been launched: the competent ministry announced the tender for the building of the networks of the national multiplexes – despite the pending elections. Two companies won the tender, but the terms of the contract have not been made public yet.

PSBs can be detrimental to themselves, but to other actors too. The Croatian PSB distorts the advertising market by using discount and dumping prices, having a detrimental effect on media pluralism, seriously affecting the national commercial and local television channels. The Hungarian national wireless agency distorts the market by providing most of its news for free “creating a virtual monopoly.”

### **The PSB ethos**

Serbia’s RTS provide only 3.8% of children programme, 2% education programme, while culture and arts took 0.69% of the total programme offer, the majority are replays, live sports broadcasting and advertisements. In the news programmes, over 33% of all sound bites belonged to government officials.

The Croatian rapporteur raises the issue of public interest: "is buying a package of award-winning movies, for example, 'commercial' or 'public' interest?" Glavaš added: "without far-reaching reforms, it is highly unlikely that HRT could be successful in achieving its primary goal: informing/educating/entertaining the general audience by promoting higher professional and production standards."

The PSB's coverage of the local elections in Macedonia showed its lack of independence: "the opening of the prime time news with TV footages of investment's promotions, subsidies, infrastructural buildings or other projects by the Government, the illustration of the news items with assessments for the number and the quality of the projects of the ruling party's candidates, the selective allocation of a space for direct speeches, the euphoric and biased manner of asking questions in the interviews with the candidates of the ruling party – evidenced how the public television in its prime time news almost entirely put its capacity in a submissive role to the ruling party. (...) In these elections, MTV showed that it lacks the key characteristics which should possess the news of any public service – impartiality, which lays at the core of its commitment towards the public, and not towards the government in general terms." – wrote Trpevska.

## Conclusion

In the SEE region, the European democratic model of broadcasting was implemented in a way that caused dysfunctional PSBs. The ethos that "established by the public, funded by the public, and controlled by the public" does not prevail. These institutions have become fields of permanent political battlegrounds, meanwhile they suffer from political and economic pressure, periodic dismissal of key staff, financial difficulties, and shrinking audiences.

Thus, the overall picture of public service broadcasting in South East Europe is gloomy, the scene is often chaotic, and the consequences of the political moves are hard to be predicted. Serbia is a striking example, where the government has been hesitating whether to keep the subscription fee system or to abolish it, and people simply stopped paying the fee on their own. The Radio Television of Vojvodina is threatened by shutdown after 67 years due to the lack of funds. But, even in Croatia, where the collection of licence fee is almost 100%, public trust is also lacking in the PSB. A remedy ensuring the proper functioning of public service broadcasters is needed in the region – otherwise the sinking ships will fulfill their destinies.

## PROJECT SUMMARY

South East European Media Observatory is a regional partnership of civil society organisations aimed at enhancing media freedom and pluralism, and influencing media reforms in the countries of South East Europe.

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