

MEDIA ASSISTANCE IN SERBIA: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

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Media assistance programs played a significant role in the development of media system in Serbia during last 20 years. While in 1990s media assistance efforts focused on ensuring the survival of independent media outlets under the authoritarian rule of the Milošević regime, the scope of the assistance expanded after the regime collapsed in 2000, to address a range of issues, such as legal reforms, the establishment of regulatory bodies, the transformation of the state TV into a public service broadcaster, professionalization of journalism, and management of media outlets. However, in many ways the reforms still depend on continuous external support. Hence, this policy brief outlines key challenges to the media reforms, and lists several lessons that could inform the future media assistance efforts in Serbia.

SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

This policy brief summarizes the findings of the recent study¹ focused on the development of independent media institutions in Serbia, from the mid-1990s until today, with special attention dedicated to the international media assistance efforts.

Throughout the last two decades a significant role in the development of media system in Serbia can be attributed to international assistance programs. During the 1990s, when mainstream media were controlled by the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević, external support was crucial for the development of independent media outlets – supporting their establishment, contributing towards operational costs, and providing training

for their staff. These media outlets served as a tool for political change by promoting democratic values and providing Serbian citizens with an alternative source of information while offering opposition parties a platform to voice their agenda into otherwise tightly controlled public discourse.

From 2000, after the fall of Milošević, the donor's approach became more systemic and strategic in respect to media reforms – a number of media laws in line with the European standards were introduced; mechanisms and institutions for regulation and self-regulation were set up; independent and commercial media as well as the professional media associations were supported, and a public service broadcasting system was established.

¹ This policy brief summarizes the main findings from: Davor Marko, "Media Reforms in Turbulent Times: The Role of Media Assistance in the Establishment of Independent Media Institutions in Serbia," Working Paper Series on International Media Assistance in the Western Balkans, Working Paper 6/2013, prepared in the framework of the Regional Research Promotion Programme in the Western Balkans (RRPP) (Sarajevo: Analitika – Center for Social Research, 2013).

Table 1. Scores for Serbian media according to the IREX Media Sustainability Index

Indicator	Year			
	2001	2005	2009	2012
Free Speech	1.72	2.39	2.21	2.00
Professional Journalism	1.43	1.75	1.89	1.72
Plurality of News Sources	2.21	2.71	2.64	1.93
Business Management	1.73	2.86	2.45	1.71
Supporting Institutions	2.21	2.79	2.58	2.17
Overall Score	1.86	2.39	2.06	1.90

Source: IREX, Media Sustainability Index, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2012.

It is difficult to see how such challenging reforms could have been initiated without external support. However, it remains to be seen whether the results are actually sustainable, given the challenging transitional context in Serbia. Namely, the conditions within media sector in Serbia are mostly not favourable for sustaining media reforms. European Commission reports on Serbia have indicated some progress in the sphere of media in recent years, but qualified it as slow, inadequate and “moderately advanced.”² According to the IREX Media Sustainability Index 2012 (MSI), Serbia has an unsustainable mixed media system. Compared to previous years, there is a noticeable drop in rankings in each of the MSI categories (see Table 1).

Moreover, the advertising revenue in the media sector is approximately EUR 175 million.³ This means that the media market is too small to be able to meet the needs of all the media outlets – 591 print outlets, 134 TV and 111 radio stations, and

107 news websites.⁴ The severe economic downturn in 2009 resulted in a 22 percent decrease in advertising revenues⁵, which contributed to increased dependence of media outlets on clientelistic ties with political and business elites.⁶

2. MEDIA ASSISTANCE IN FIVE PHASES

The media assistance approaches in Serbia reflected the dynamics of its political and economic system, and can be divided in at least five phases:

- *Phase of severely restricted access (1990-1995)* – with international isolation and sanctions, the access of donors to Serbia was restricted by the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević. In this phase media assistance was characterized by non-systemic support that did not attempt to influence policies and structural

² European Commission, Serbia 2012 Progress Report (Brussels: European Commission, October 10, 2012).

³ International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), “Serbia at a Glance,” in *Media Sustainability Index 2012: The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia* (Washington: IREX, 2012), p. 130.

⁴ “Registar dozvola” [Register of Permits], Republic Broadcasting Agency.

⁵ International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), *Media Sustainability Index (MSI) 2008: The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia* (Washington: IREX, 2008); International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), *Media Sustainability Index (MSI) 2009: The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia* (Washington: IREX, 2009).

⁶ Anti-Corruption Council of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, Report on Pressures on and Control of Media in Serbia (Belgrade: Anti-Corruption Council of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, September 19, 2011).

issues but was focused on particular media outlets and organizations. The support was externally designed and primarily aimed at ensuring survival of a handful of independent media outlets in the extremely hostile environment.

- *The post-Dayton phase (1995-1998)* – in the period following the signing of the Dayton peace agreement which stopped the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the activities of international actors in Serbia became more focused, coherent, coordinated, and strategically oriented, aiming to help independent media to influence political changes.
- *Kosovo crisis and a new repression (1998-1999)* – During the Kosovo crisis and NATO intervention in Serbia, the weakened Serbian regime imposed very strict laws with aim to control independent media. During this phase, US officials, including the representatives of US-based donors, were not allowed to work in Serbia, but they continued to support anti-regime media from the outside. This period was also marked with a high degree of coordination among donors in order to enable the support to independent media in such restrictive conditions.
- *Democratic changes and building enabling environment (2000-2008)* – with the collapse of Milošević's regime and the start of democratization processes, donors' priorities also changed, and the EU started to gain a more prominent role. As a result, this phase was focused on policy changes

and on systemic reforms in the media sector.

- *Economic crisis and "partitocracy" (since 2008)* – The 2008 economic crisis resulted in the substantial shrinking of the media market, which instigated a new form of media dependency on the state and business funding. During this phase, international donors decreased their investment and limited their support for project-based initiatives. With the exception of the EU, there was no strategically oriented and direct financial support for media development.⁷

3. AN OVERVIEW OF FUNDING

There is no precise data on the amount of funds directed to the Serbian media.⁸ As Rhodes estimates in his study, between 1996 and 2006, Serbia received EUR 44.9 million (or 17 per cent)⁹ of the recorded support for media in Western Balkans that was assessed at EUR 269.2 for the same period. If we count all recorded and estimated support from 1991 to 2012, roughly EUR 90 million was spent on media development in the country.¹⁰

While US-based donors were crucial during the 1990s, after 2000 the EU funding for Serbian media exceeded the US government funding.

Myriad of the US donors and international development agencies, including USAID, and its implementing agency IREX, Open Society Fund, National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the National Democratic



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⁷ Marko, "Media Reforms in Turbulent Times," pp. 26-28.

⁸ Hawley Johnson, "Model Interventions: The Evolution of Media Development Strategies in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia from 2000 to 2007" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2012), pp. 8-9.

⁹ Aaron Rhodes, *Ten Years of Media Support to the Balkans: An Assessment* (Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, 2007), p. 15.

¹⁰ This is an estimated amount based on analysis of available and published data, for example USAID published they spent around \$ 38 million from 1997-2012, OSF supported Serbian media with \$ 28,5 million only in 1990s, EU supported media with EUR 1,7 million in 1990s, and with more than EUR 20 million from 2000 to 2012, plus EUR 8 million planned for digitalization. Additional support has been provided by NED (around \$ 2 million from 2006 – 2012), and other donors such as Norwegian People's Aid, Balkan Trust for Democracy, Konrad Adenauer and its media program, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, etc.

Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), contributed to the development of independent media as tools for a wider, democratic and political change in Serbia. These efforts were intensified in 1999 and 2000, when revolution in Serbia happened. Presnall observes that “compared to 1995, therefore, the US government was spending between 9 and 22 times as much in 1999 and 2000 respectively on democracy promotion aid to Serbia.”¹¹

Since 2000, the EU support to the Serbian media amounted to around EUR 20 million through the CARDS Programme. Additionally, the European Agency for Reconstruction (EAR) invested EUR 18.5 million in media support from 2000 to 2007. One half of this amount (EUR 9.64 million) was spent on technical and logistical support, mainly to Radio-Television of Serbia (RTS) – a public service broadcaster.¹² There were also other areas of EU support, such as EUR 3.3 million aimed at enhancing public participation in debate and raising awareness on European Integration.

4. APPROACHES TO MEDIA ASSISTANCE

At least three main approaches to media assistance in Serbia can be identified:

- The first one was “existential support” that characterized assistance efforts to independent media in Serbia from 1990 to 1996, when they operated under the survival mode. In this phase media outlets were supported on ad hoc basis, without strategic approach or long-term commitment. This approach roughly cor-

responds with the first two phases of media assistance in the country (see Table 2).

- The second approach considered media as a means of political change¹³ – this approach was present from 1996 to 2000; it was strategically oriented, characterised by strict political priorities of donors, with a high level of coordination, and with substantial financial support to anti-regime media. This approach thus corresponds with the second and the third phase of media assistance efforts.
- Finally, the third approach was characterized by the support to build an enabling environment for the development of professional and economically viable media sector after 2000. This approach corresponds with the fourth and the fifth phase of media assistance efforts in the country.

The most significant areas of media assistance in the case of Serbia were the support to independent media, educational programs, and legal reforms in support to establishment and reforms of key media institutions, such as the public service broadcaster, the regulatory agency and the self-regulatory body.

Support to independent media

Independent media institutions benefited from the assistance since donors enabled their survival under the hostile political circumstances during the 1990s. Funds were channelled to media outlets through specific projects for program production, purchase of equipment and staff training, among other things. The support was substantial, short-term, and relatively well coordinated.

¹¹ Aaron Presnall, “Which Way the Wind Blows: Democracy Promotion and International Actors in Serbia,” *Democratization* 16, no. 4 (2009), p. 666.

¹² See European Agency for Reconstruction website: <http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/archives/ear/agency/28-ContractListWeb/ser/ser.htm> (Accessed on October 11, 2013).

¹³ Tara Susman-Pena, *Making Media Development More Effective: A Special Report to the Center for International Media Assistance* (Washington: Center for International Media Assistance, 2012), p. 26.

Once regime of Slobodan Milošević collapsed, coordination among donors became weaker and donor goals differed according to their individual program orientation. After 2000 the donors' support became rather dispersed, without an exit strategy or any plans for ensuring sustainability of supported media outlets and institutions. Once the aid stopped, many of these media outlets were closed down,¹⁴ while others were forced to “rapidly commercialize”¹⁵, as was the case with TV B92 – a TV station that was the symbol of resistance to the Milošević regime.

Education and trainings

Numerous journalists, editors, and media professionals gained new skills and knowledge through media assistance programs. During the 1990s, professional standards were introduced to Serbian journalists through extensive trainings and selective institutional support to certain media labelled as “independent” or “oppositional.”

Nevertheless, educational programs did not always meet the real needs of the media institutions, but have often addressed the donors' programmatic needs and plans. For example, significant efforts were invested in training in investigative journalism, while neglecting the fact that media outlets could actually not afford investigative journalism due to financial constraints or political pressures.¹⁶ At the same time, there was a general lack of educational

programs in media management, although media in Serbia worked in extremely challenging market conditions and were in dire need for skilled managers.

Legal reforms

The EU, through its conditionality mechanisms within the EU accession process, requested Serbia to change its media laws¹⁷ and the laws on key media institutions such as the regulatory agency and the public service broadcaster. At the beginning of this process, the OSCE Media Department, in close co-operation with the EU and the Council of Europe, assisted in drafting and amending media laws to meet international and European standards. However, most of these laws were only adopted in order to formally meet preconditions for membership at the Council of Europe (CoE) and the EU, while in practice professional demands and criteria were often neglected.¹⁸

Establishment and support to public media institutions

The international assistance to establishing a public service broadcasting system (RTS – Radio-Television Serbia) and the Republic Broadcasting Agency (RBA) was important in several ways. The experts appointed by international organizations played a crucial role in drafting the legislative framework for these institutions. Furthermore, the EU provided grants for improving technical conditions and purchasing modern equipment for these institutions.

¹⁴ Krishna Kumar, “International Assistance to Promote Independent Media in Transition and Post-conflict Societies,” *Democratization* 13, no. 4(2006), p. 664.

¹⁵ This phrase, “rapidly commercialize” refers to the fact that these media outlets were forced to commercialize in a very short period of time, without adequate strategy, which has had negative impact on their editorial policy.

¹⁶ European Commission and Economic Policy and Regional Development (EPRD), *Mapping of EU Media Support 2000-2010* (Brussels: European Commission, September 2012), p. 26.

¹⁷ The most important laws adopted as part of the EU conditionality process were the “Zakon o radiodifuziji” [Broadcasting Act], *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia* 42/02, 97/04, 76/05, 79/05, 62/06, 85/06 and 86/06, the “Zakon o javnom informisanju” [Law on Public Information], *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia* 43/03, 61/05, the “Zakon o slobodnom pristupu informacijama od javnog značaja” [Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance], *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia* 120/04, 54/07 and the “Zakon o oglašavanju” [Law on Advertising], *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia* 79/05.

¹⁸ “Legal Monitoring of Serbian Media Scene: Monthly Reports 2009–2013,” Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM).

However, it is evident that most of the efforts aimed at the transforming the RTS into a genuine PSB were negatively influenced by the broadcaster's links with political elites; by the subsequent changes of legislative provision that undermined its independence and autonomy; and by clientelistic relations between RTS management, the government, and the political and business elites that had a detrimental effect on its editorial orientation. Additionally, RTS is facing substantial financial problems making it even more vulnerable to external influences.¹⁹ Moreover, the very model of PSB is now being questioned due to the process of digitalization and the rise of new media.

When it comes to Republic Broadcasting Agency,²⁰ international organizations such as OSCE, CoE and the EU expressed their serious concern regarding the way the licensing procedure was managed by the RBA. The EU specifically indicated the lack of transparency in the Agency's process of decision-making. Nevertheless, most of RBA's disputable decisions have not been changed.²¹

5. LESSONS LEARNED

Democratic transformation in Serbia started only a decade ago, in 2000, which is a relatively short period of time for a full adoption of newly introduced institutional models, laws and practices. During this intensive period of reforms, the country was overloaded with demanding systemic changes in the media sector, such as, for example, the creation of the PSB, introduction of regulatory framework for the broadcasting sector; or supporting the in-

dependent media outlets. The success of these and many other reform initiatives was conditioned and often undermined by numerous factors:

First, the implementation of reform initiatives suffered due to a complex set of negative political and economic influences, such as legal insecurity, clientelistic relations in the media sector, and underdeveloped media market. For example, legal arrangements often are being only formally adopted in order to fulfil specific requirements and conditions such as those linked to the EU accession process. In practice such arrangements fail to make impact due to the dominance of informal practices and politicization of the state²² resulting in selective application of laws and procedures. These factors must be carefully considered when planning media assistance strategies in a similar context, and especially in any future media reform efforts in Serbia. Robust strategies must be designed to enable the newly introduced institutions and commercial media to develop viable financing and operational models that would ensure their long-term sustainability and functionality while preserving a degree of independence from political and financial power centers.

Second, the success of reforms was significantly limited by the lack of long-term strategy of major donors and development agencies. Hence, there is a need for prolonged engagement of donors and international actors, especially in respect to key media institutions such as PSB and RBA, as these are constantly challenged by ruling elites. Such efforts also need to entail elements of international and local monitoring and scrutiny of the government's

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 135.

²⁰ International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), *Media Sustainability Index (MSI) 2003: The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia* (Washington: IREX, 2003).

²¹ Anti-Corruption Council of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, Report on Pressures on and Control of Media in Serbia, p. 40.

²² On the issues related to the general problem of 'politicization of the state' and its impact on the media reforms see for example Zielonka and Mancini, 2011.

actions towards these institutions once the assistance programs stop.

Third, the assistance approaches that primarily focus on the media outlets as means of political or social change are of a short-term nature. Namely, such efforts do not create legal, financial or political preconditions for long-term sustainability of supported media outlets since the context under such circumstances does not allow for a more systemic approach and long term thinking. The best example being rather restrictive context under Milošević's regime in Serbia which forced donors to focus on helping the bare survival of independent and oppositional media, let alone systemic or structural reforms. As a consequence, once the political and economic transition started, these media outlets found themselves in an uncertain situation of political turmoil, economic and legal challenges, without plans for further development or sustainability. This led to the collapse of many such media outlets, while those that survived were forced to rapid commercialization, which negatively impacted their public service mission and editorial policy.

Fourth, the donor coordination is an important element for the overall success of media reforms and, specifically, for effec-

tive support to the specific media institutions in need of substantial and prolonged assistance. Coordination could help donors with diverse agendas to set up the priorities in a specific context and make their assistance efforts more rational and efficient. More than anything, coordination is vital in the circumstances of severely restricted access as was the case in Serbia during 1990s.

Fifth, the Western institutional models often used as a blue-print for the process of reforms – especially in the cases of a public service broadcaster and regulatory bodies – have to be selected carefully and adapted to the recipient country's context in order to be able to function properly. Local elite will often only formally adopt suggested reforms, but will in practice try to maintain its control over these key institutions.

Considering all of the above, it could be concluded that international media assistance significantly influenced the process of media reforms in Serbia. However, the introduced reforms appear to be rather fragile – if the introducing laws and media institutions are to become an integral and sustainable part of the local media landscape, a more contextualized and strategic engagement of donors and other international actors is needed.

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