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International Assistance and Media Democratization in the Western Balkans: Lessons Learned¹

1. Introduction

This policy memo summarizes the key findings from a comparative research project that explored the link between international media assistance and the democratic transformation of the media in five Western Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia² and Serbia. Its purpose is to contribute to the understanding of factors that can influence the results of international assistance programs and conditionality mechanisms aimed at the development of sustainable and functional media institutions in countries undergoing democratization. Moreover, the research findings offer an insight into the implications of the transposition of imported institutional models into the media systems of transitional societies in the Western Balkans, and as such can inform similar media assistance programs in the future.

2. International Media Assistance in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkan countries have different experiences with international media assistance programs. Due to the specific post-conflict circumstances and the role of international actors, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have seen extensive assistance efforts aimed at reforming their media sectors. Albania, Macedonia and Serbia have benefited from such assistance programs to a lesser degree, with Albania receiving a significantly smaller scope of assistance than all the other countries in the region (Table 1).

Table 1: Media Assistance in Western Balkans 1996-2006 (in millions of Euro)

	Training	Direct Support	Media Environment	Total Euro
Albania	6.9	1.8	1.9	10.6
Bosnia-Herzegovina	17.4	42	27.7	87.1
Croatia	2.4	19.7	14.5	36.6
Macedonia	3.4	9.2	11.2	23.8
Montenegro	1.3	2.9	3.4	7.6
Serbia	5.4	26.4	13.1	44.9
Kosovo	6.1	45.6	6.9	58.6
Balkans	42.9	147.6	78.7	269.2

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

Largely thanks to international support, in less than two decades, most of the analyzed Western Balkans media systems have undergone four fundamental reforms:

- Liberalization of the media system combined with the introduction of a new legal framework and a media regulatory authority;
- Transformation of the state-owned broadcasters into public service broadcasters;

¹ This policy memo is based on: Kristina Irion & Tarik Jusić, *International Assistance and Media Democratization in the Western Balkans: A Cross-National Comparison*, (Global Media Journal, German Edition, Vol. 4, No.2, Autumn/Winter 2014).

² Formally referred to as 'The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia'.

- Switch-over from analogue to digital terrestrial broadcasting with the digitalization of the media sector in general; and
- Professionalization of journalism exemplified in the introduction of a self-regulatory framework and the development of professional organizations, such as associations of journalists.

As a result, there are a number of important achievements that at least to a certain degree can be attributed to the international media assistance programs in the Western Balkans: For example, all of the analyzed countries now have a plural media landscape; a functional system of the issuance and regulation of broadcast licenses has been introduced; defamation has been decriminalized; and hate speech is placed under control.

Nevertheless, such an extensive media transformation, combined with broader and highly complex democratization processes within those societies, faces numerous and complex challenges:

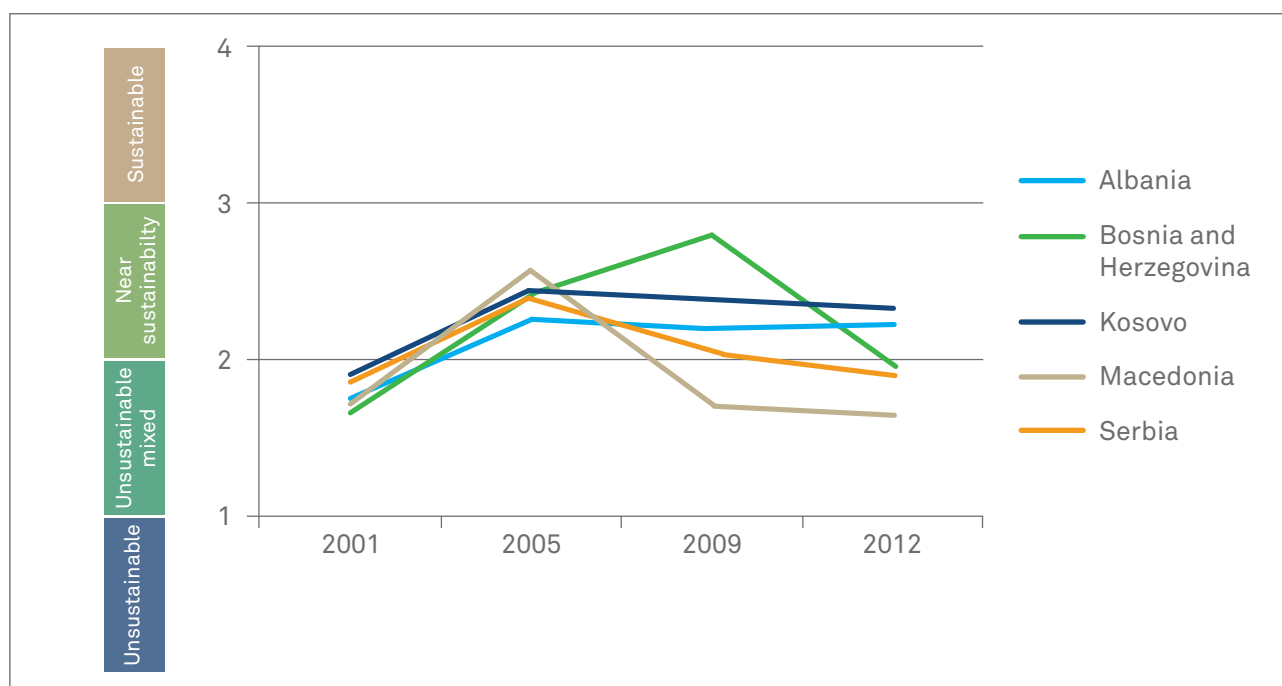
- Often, important legislation is not adopted on time; there is a high level of legal insecurity due to the constant changes of legislation, rules and norms; and there is a significant discrepancy between formally adopted rules and their implementation in practice as the laws and policies are selectively applied.
- Moreover, there is a high level of politicization of the media, resulting in colonization of the media by political parties and the government and subordination of the media to political and business interests.
- Last but not least, the media market in all of the studied countries is very small in terms of revenues and yet oversaturated with a disproportionally large number of media outlets.

As a consequence, the results of media assistance programs in the Western Balkans differ among the analyzed countries. While some assistance programs have been relatively successful, others have ended in failure or stagnation – this is most notably the case with attempts to establish public service broadcasters in the analyzed countries. Moreover, across the region there are trends towards the reintroduction of earlier authoritarian practices, often dismantling achievements of recent democratic reforms. There are many examples of this, such as attempts to place formally independent regulatory agencies under political control. Although in many cases there is a relatively high level of formal compliance with best European practices and standards defined by the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the EU, there is a general deficit in the implementation of those norms – a consequence of systemic obstruction by local elites that prefer informality over the rule of law. Overall, there is a clear tendency towards the re-politicization of public media institutions coupled with erosion of the democratic achievements of the past two decades. This trend closely corresponds with the phasing out of international media assistance in all of the five analyzed countries. At the same time, assistance efforts aimed at private media have also achieved mixed results, exemplified in the failure of the internationally sponsored OBN TV network project in BiH, which was abandoned by donors in the early 2000s after an initial investment of over 20 million \$US. Moreover, assistance programs aimed at the professionalization of journalism based on self-organization and bottom-up approaches, such as the creation of professional associations of journalists, introduction of self-regulatory codes of conduct and establishment of self-regulatory bodies, such as Press Councils, did not have much impact when it comes to the introduction of higher professional and ethical standards of reporting in practice.

It is therefore not surprising that the IREX Media Sustainability Index score for the five countries showed significant progress in the early 2000s³ but by 2012 most countries had dropped back to where they were a decade before, which is especially visible in the cases of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Macedonia (Figure 1).

³ The IREX Media Sustainability Index indicators are grouped around five objectives: free speech, professional journalism, plurality of news sources, business management and supporting institutions; Source: International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), “Media Sustainability Index (MSI) Methodology”, July 14, 2011.

Figure 1: Western Balkans: IREX MSI



Source: Kristina Irion & Tarik Jusić, *International Assistance and Media Democratization in the Western Balkans: A Cross-National Comparison*, (Global Media Journal, German Edition, Vol. 4, No.2, Autumn/Winter 2014), p.12.

Such rapid progress in the early stages followed by the recent drop in the IREX score could be at least partially attributed to the significant reduction in international assistance to the media after 2005 combined with the renewal of clientelistic links between the media and local centers of political and economic influence.

3. Conclusion

The success of international media assistance programs highly depends on the local context. In most of the analyzed cases, imported solutions and transposed institutions have not been able to become fully rooted within local media systems. On the contrary, with the recent retreat of international donors and the reduction in media assistance programs, all of the five countries in the Western Balkans region are experiencing retrograde processes and a scaling back from the reforms introduced during last two decades. The sustainability of the introduced media institutions, norms and practices is increasingly challenged by re-politicization of the media systems in these countries. It is therefore unreasonable to expect that the transposed media institutions will be able to outperform the local context. In the mid-to-long run, sustainable democratization of media institutions will inevitably depend on the development of a democratic political culture in the studied countries – a process that will take much more time than is normally envisioned for media assistance efforts.

That presents a significant challenge to the dominant international media assistance approaches, which are characterized by short-term thinking, absence of long-term strategy, and lack of coherent approaches to institution building. All evidence points to the need for the introduction of long-term, consistent international media assistance programs that are tailored to local needs and the contextual determinants of the country in question.

Although the EU conditionality mechanisms still provide a strong incentive for Western Balkan countries to continue with media reforms, there is an urgent need to improve the implementation of formally adopted standards and norms, before the mismatch between form and substance renders reforms meaningless.

4. Recommendations

Given all of the above, a number of recommendations for the international media assistance efforts in the Western Balkans countries, but possibly elsewhere as well, can be outlined:

- *Strategic, long-term approach:* When addressing local needs, it is of utmost importance to maintain a strategic outlook for the reforms in order to ensure conditions for consolidation of sustainable media institutions. In particular, international media assistance should not be phased prematurely, and should follow through on the reforms even beyond the phase of localization and domestication of introduced media institutions.
- *Policy consistency and stability:* In order for the reforms to take root, local and international stakeholders should work towards consistent media policy objectives and ensure policy stability.
- *Local ownership:* International media assistance should approach media reforms and institution building in a way that involves local stakeholders and fosters a sense of ownership.
- *Contextual sensitivity:* International media assistance should be adjusted to the local context, avoiding any unnecessary distortion of local media markets.
- *Implementation:* Special attention should be placed on ensuring implementation of formally introduced reforms. The discrepancy between form and substance of the reforms should be addressed early on if the sustainability of introduced media institutions is a goal.
- *Monitoring and scrutiny:* Last but not least, there is a need for systematic monitoring and international scrutiny of the progress of media reforms, serving as a basis for EU conditionality mechanisms, diplomatic efforts and future international media assistance programs.

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