

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ASSISTANCE IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: LESSONS LEARNED

Authors: Tarik Jusić and Nidžara Ahmetašević

Bosnia and Herzegovina has benefited from comprehensive and prolonged international media assistance efforts during the last two decades: the legal framework was thoroughly reformed; regulatory and self-regulatory mechanisms were introduced; the independent and commercial media sector received substantial support; and a public service broadcasting system was created. However, many reform initiatives have been met with fierce resistance, while others failed or were only partially successful. In some cases, once the donors and international actors reduced their involvement, the reform processes stopped or were reversed. This policy brief looks into the complex relationship between the local context on one side, and the media reforms that were initiated through international assistance programs on the other. The goal is to identify some of the key challenges to the media assistance efforts in the country, and eventually to draw some lessons for future assistance projects.

SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is often considered one of the most prominent examples of comprehensive international intervention into local affairs aimed at post-war state building, including institutions of the local media system. International actors played an important role in creating legislative frameworks and regulatory institutions for the media sector, started the reform of the PSB system, supported the development of independent media, and introduced a self-regulatory framework. These efforts have resulted in the pacification of media discourse and elimination of outright ethnically-charged

hate speech, and have opened up the media space for opposition voices and alternative sources of information.

However, although international community-led efforts to reform the media system have achieved progress in many important areas, a general deterioration of the conditions in the media sphere has been witnessed in recent years. After a significant increase in the IREX Media Sustainability Index (MSI) between 2001 and 2009, its overall score declined in 2012 to the level it was at a decade ago, indicating deterioration in all five areas covered by the MSI: free speech, professional journalism, plurality of news sources, business management and supporting institutions.

Table 1: IREX Media Sustainability Index for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2001-2012

Indicator	Year				
	2001	2004	2005	2009	2012
Free speech	1.95	2.83	2.80	2.94	2.45
Professional journalism	1.37	2.23	2.11	2.30	1.68
Plurality of news sources	1.84	2.71	2.65	3.02	2.16
Business management	1.53	2.31	2.20	2.82	1.61
Supporting institutions	1.63	2.54	2.31	2.97	1.95
Overall score	1.66	2.52	2.41	2.81	1.97

Source: IREX Media Sustainability Index Reports 2002-2013

Similarly, recent European Commission (EC) annual progress reports for BiH emphasize that “a growing number of journalists and editors are subject to physical violence and intimidation, including death threats”¹ while “[f]ollow up by police and the judiciary remains insufficient.”² Moreover, “political pressure on the media and the polarization of the media along political and ethnic lines remain of concern.”³

The situation is further complicated due to a rather small media market in financial terms, which cannot support today’s media landscape - with 44 TV channels, 143 radio channels, around 80 weekly and monthly publications, and a dozen daily newspapers. The total advertising revenue in the media sector was assessed at around US\$65.47 million in 2012.⁴ Such a small and fragmented market contributes to political and business parallelism in the media sector, as limited revenues force media to seek powerful patrons in order to survive. In addition, the level of professionalization of journalism in BiH – understood to consist of journalists’ level of autonomy, the existence of professional norms, and mechanisms of self-regulation – is rather low. This forms fertile ground for the instrumentalization of journalism – a situation where the media are controlled by outside actors, such as parties, politicians, or business interests.

In our research, we attempted to investigate the results of the international intervention in the media sector in light of the recent negative trends and complex contextual challenges to the reforms. The purpose of this policy brief is to identify some of the key challenges that have con-

tributed to the limited success of the media assistance efforts in the country.

This brief is based on a broader study⁵ that included interviews with some of the key stakeholders involved in media reforms in BiH during the last two decades, complemented by a review of secondary resources and legal documents. Special attention is given to some of the major media assistance efforts in BiH: Public Service Broadcasting (PSB), the Communication Regulatory Agency (CRA), the Open Broadcast Network (OBN), and the Press Council. These four cases are selected because they received significant attention from international organizations involved in media assistance efforts. However, whereas the CRA has been celebrated as one of the most successful cases of media assistance, the OBN has often been labeled as one of its greatest failures. Assistance to PSB is seen to have had only limited effects, with PSB reform stalled for over a decade. Furthermore, the Press Council faces financial uncertainty, while its integration in the local context has been cumbersome at best. Hence, the analysis of these cases can offer valuable insight into the challenges posed to international media assistance efforts in the country.

2. MEDIA ASSISTANCE STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES

A myriad of international organizations, development agencies and private foundations have been involved in democratization efforts in BiH. An estimated 87 million Euros were disbursed through

¹ European Commission, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2010 Progress Report (Brussels: European Commission, November 9, 2010), p. 17.

² European Commission, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2011 Progress Report (Brussels: European Commission, October 12, 2011), p. 16.

³ European Commission, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2012 Progress Report (Brussels: European Commission, October 10, 2012), p. 17.

⁴ International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), “Bosnia and Herzegovina,” in *Media Sustainability Index 2013: Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia*, (Washington: IREX, 2013), pp. 30-31.

⁵ Tarik Jusić and Nidžara Ahmetašević, “Media Reforms through Intervention: International Media Assistance in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” Working Paper Series on International Media Assistance in the Western Balkans, Working Paper 3/2013, prepared in the framework of the Regional Research Promotion Programme in the Western Balkans (RRPP) (Sarajevo: Analitika – Center for Social Research, 2013).

media assistance programs in the country from 1996 until 2006,⁶ and it can be safely assumed that by 2013 that number was probably over 100 million Euros.

The OHR was assigned the central role in the implementation of the media assistance strategy. Its mandate concerning the media stemmed from its role in the oversight of the implementation of the peace agreement. In addition, the OSCE had the mandate to observe media coverage of elections and through this mandate facilitated numerous media reform projects.

Goals and Objectives of Media Assistance

BiH became a laboratory for developing and testing approaches for media assistance in a post-conflict society. The overall goal of the major media reforms was to contribute to the democratization and pacification of a post-war society. Our study shows that media reform efforts can be grouped into six main areas of engagement:

- Eliminating war propaganda and pacifying media discourse in the immediate post-war period.
- Supporting media pluralism and independent media as an alternative to nationalist and government-controlled media.
- Introducing legal and regulatory frameworks to foster the development of a media market and to discourage inflammatory propaganda.
- Reforming government-controlled broadcasters into public service broadcasters.
- Promoting professional and ethics standards through self-regulation and professional associations of journalists.
- Supporting the development of civil society organizations in the media sector such as training, research, and investigative reporting centers,

as well as supporting media industry associations.

Phases and Focus of Media Assistance

Although donors' approaches to media reforms depended on the political priorities of the given moment, we have identified three distinctive phases of media assistance in BiH.

The first phase (1996-1998) was characterized by a focus on the pacification of media discourse and pluralization of the media sector. The goal was to sanitize the media space, which was polluted by ethnocentric war-mongering propaganda and excluded moderate voices and opposition parties from the public discourse. In this phase, "there was little discussion of 'European standards' and 'self-sustainability.' Primary emphasis was placed upon breaking political control; creating alternative voices; promoting ethnic tolerance; fighting the rhetoric of hate [...] and developing pluralism."⁷ The assumption was that the development of an independent media sector, weakening nationalists' grip over the media, and eliminating war-mongering propaganda, is of fundamental importance for the success of democratization efforts. Faced with a difficult situation upon their arrival in the country, international peace implementation agencies implemented projects in a rush. Major projects included the creation of independent state-wide broadcasters, such as the Open Broadcast Network (OBN) and the Free Election Radio Network (FERN), whose purpose was to promote more moderate political options, as well as the introduction of basic regulatory mechanisms for the media through the Media Experts Commission (MEC), thus limiting the negative effects of nationalist parties' control of the media sector. Many such projects were provisional in nature, and were subsequently shut down, which points to the absence of a strategic



Dr. Tarik Jusic is Executive Director at the Center for Social Research Analitika. He holds a doctoral degree from the Institute for Media and Communication Studies, University of Vienna, Austria, and an MA degree in Political Science from Central European University, Budapest, Hungary. Tarik worked as a program director at Mediacentar Sarajevo (2002 – 2011), and also lectured at the Department of Political Science and International Relations, Sarajevo School of Science and Technology (2009 – 2013). He has published a number of academic and professional papers and has edited several books dealing with the development of media in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region of Southeast Europe.

⁶ Aaron Rhodes, *Ten Years of Media Support to the Balkans: An Assessment* (Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, 2007), p. 15.

⁷ Chris Riley, "Painstaking Efforts: OHR Media Development Strategy in Post-Dayton BiH," in *Arranged Marriage: International Community and Media Reforms in BiH*, ed. Svtjetlana Nedimović (Sarajevo: Media Plan Institute, 2001), p. 2.



Dr. Nidžara Ahmetašević holds a PhD degree from the Joint Programme in Diversity Management and Governance at the University in Graz, Austria. Her field of research is on democratization and media development in post conflict countries. Nidžara holds a Masters in Human Rights and Democratization in South East Europe, a joint program of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of the Universities of Sarajevo and Bologna. Before her master studies, as a Ron Brown Fellow, (US State Department award supporting young professionals from Central and Eastern Europe), she spent one year at DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy, Duke University, North Carolina. Nidžara has a long career as a journalist, covering human rights, foreign policy and transitional justice issues in particular.

approach to media reforms in this early phase. At the same time, significant media reform efforts faced fierce resistance from local political elites who were not ready to cede control over the media.

The frustrating experience international actors had during the first few years resulted in a relatively quick change in the overall approach to media reforms. It became clear that there was a need for more comprehensive and long-term media reforms if those efforts were to yield any substantial results. The second phase (1998 – 2002) was marked by structural reforms focused on the creation of a legal and regulatory framework, public service broadcasting reform, and support to independent, commercial media outlets. This phase was characterized by a more strategic and systematic approach combined with the extensive use of OHR powers. In addition to legal reforms, OHR and other international actors concentrated on the creation of key institutions of the media system. In 1998, the OHR established the Independent Media Commission (IMC) – a regulatory body that was later transformed into the Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA). The same year, the process of transformation of government-controlled broadcasters into the PSB system started, and in 2002, a set of laws, introduced by OHR, formally established the PSB system in the country. Another important pillar of assistance was the creation of a self-regulation body for print media, the Press Council.

Finally, the third phase (from 2002 onwards) was characterized by a gradual decrease of direct international involvement in media reforms and a more significant role in that respect by local actors. For example, the CRA was fully transferred into local hands, while responsibility for PSB reform was given to local political leaders. The OHR stopped intervening in media legislation in line with the overall trend of reduced

involvement of international actors in local policies. This was coupled with a gradual decrease in available donor funds and ambitions. The improvement of business management and the development of supporting institutions and professional organizations were seen as important elements of donor exit strategies as the focus shifted to the non-governmental sector. This also coincided with the country's EU accession process and the emphasis that was placed by the EU on PSB reforms and on ensuring the independence of the CRA. The interventionist approach from first two phases was replaced by conditionality mechanisms linked to EU accession.

3. KEY FINDINGS

Early media intervention in BiH was often based on ad-hoc decisions, a sudden change of priorities, short-term and unreliable funding, and a lack of strategic orientation and longer-term commitment by donors. Too often donors and the OHR viewed media assistance as a way to quickly influence the political climate.⁸

All this had negative effect on the success of reforms. For example, the OBN project failed largely due to irregular and insufficient funding, the absence of a proper strategy, and changing donor priorities, which suddenly shifted to PSB reform. In the case of PSB, it appears that OHR and international actors pulled out too quickly, given the immense complexity of the reforms and the resistance by local political elites. This has contributed to PSB reform being stalled for a decade now.

The Western models that were used as a blueprint for institutional reforms sometimes did not correspond with the local setting. A case in point is the use of the BBC model for the transformation of the PSB system in BiH. Between 1998

⁸ Dan De Luce, *Assessment of USAID Media Assistance in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1996–2002: PPC Evaluation Working Paper No. 6* (United States Agency for International Development, Bureau for Policy and Program Coordination, 2003), p. 11.

and 2002, the two government-controlled entity broadcasters – the Radio-Television of Federation BiH (RTVFBiH) and the Radio-Television of Republika Srpska (RTRS) – were pushed by the OHR to become public service broadcasters. A third, state-wide, cross-ethnic public service broadcaster, the Bosnia-Herzegovina Radio and Television (BHRT), was established. The three broadcasters were ambitiously supposed to establish a joint public service broadcasting system, to closely cooperate in the production of programs, to manage assets and share advertising revenues and to collect the subscription fee through a Joint Corporation – a new organizational unit that would facilitate cooperation among the three broadcasters, coordinate the activities within the system, manage the equipment and the transmission network, and be in charge of sales and advertising. This model was proposed by international consultants, and inspired by the BBC, which operates according to a similar concept: the system rests on an internal market among PSB units, where all the services are to be purchased between the units, thus making production more cost-effective and the system more accountable.⁹ However, the model faced fierce opposition due to conflicting political and business interests, and has so far not been implemented: A decade after its introduction, the three broadcasters act more like competitors than parts of the same system, and key elements of the system, such as the Joint Corporation, still have not been established.

Similarly, the Press Council was modeled after the British Press Complaints Commission, and it was expected that it would be able to obtain financial sustainability by being financed from membership fees and contributions from publishers. However, over a decade after its introduction, the Council remains fully dependent on donor funding since publishers are not willing or

able to provide any substantial financial support.

Much attention has been given to the issue of donor dependence and the importance of financial sustainability of the recipient media outlets and institutions. In order to achieve financial sustainability, public and private media institutions need sufficient time to conceive and implement robust financing models. For example, OBN suffered from the absence of long-term funding and commitment, which resulted in its collapse, and the Press Council barely escaped the same destiny. The underdeveloped media market simply could not sustain either of these institutions. Donors often lacked coherent, longer-term commitment, or a clear strategy of sustainability tailored to each institution.

Findings from relevant literature demonstrate that enduring institutional changes occurred where local elites welcomed external assistance efforts. According to Goetz, “reform involves considerable risk to leaders: the risk that they will lose patronage resources (public sector jobs and rents), and also lose popular support.”¹⁰ In other words, radical institutional changes that significantly modify the resources of elite patronage and the existing power equilibrium are more challenging to implement than incremental institutional change. Media reforms that do not significantly undermine the privileges of local stakeholders have stronger chances for success. Media reforms in BiH generally faced the continuous resistance of local political elites, and reforms were implemented mostly through the use of OHR powers and EU conditionality mechanisms. As a result, progress was slow and frequently stalled, and once international attention shifted to other issues, local elites were all too quick to reclaim their control over media institutions. The continuous pressure

⁹ Daniel Lindvall, *The Public Broadcasting Reform – A reflection of the Bosnian dilemma*, Unpublished Draft Paper, November 24, 2005 (on file with the authors), pp. 3-4.

¹⁰ Anne Marie Goetz, “Manoeuvring Past Clientelism: Institutions and Incentives to Generate Constituencies in Support of Governance Reforms,” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 45, no. 4(2007), p. 404.

on the CRA, since its full transfer into local hands, is a good example – local elites use all available means to reduce the agency’s independence and to regain control over its decision-making bodies. Similarly, there are continuous attempts by parties and governments on the state and entity level to influence appointment procedures for decision-making bodies of the PSB.

To a certain extent, international actors attempted to establish cooperation with local politicians and the media community, albeit with limited success. The combined effects of a post-conflict society with ethnic divisions and slow democratic transition left a very limited window of opportunity for substantial cooperation with local decision-makers. Often programs could not effectively be coordinated through local governing institutions due to pervasive ethnic divisions and the strong politicization of the state.¹¹ Often, consultation with the local media community took place only after the laws were already drafted by international experts, and mutual distrust prevented more meaningful cooperation between international consultants and local media professionals. In a 2008 paper, Aida Hozić points out that in many cases, international consultants merely dismissed local journalists and media professionals as incompetent or politically biased. As a consequence, there is often a lack of a sense of ownership of the reforms among local actors, which translates into weaker support for proposed solutions. Moreover, such reforms run the risk of not being in tune with local needs, capacities, and other contextual factors, which may undermine their chances of proper integration into the local context once external support stops.

Scholars emphasize the importance of international actors monitoring governments, criticizing them, exerting pressure, and using sanctions. This is confirmed by the experience of media assistance in BiH. During the first two phases, the interna-

tional community closely observed government behavior and reacted when reforms were threatened, most importantly in the case of CRA. However, a rather inconsistent, partial, and *ad hoc* approach to the monitoring of the implementation of reforms, as well as to the scrutiny of government actions and policies concerning specific areas of media assistance, has taken place after 2002 – systematic monitoring efforts are not apparent, and even when problems are noticed, no concrete measures are taken. As a consequence, political pressure on media institutions, especially on the CRA and PSB, has been significantly increasing in recent years.

Finally, donor coordination proves to be an important factor in media reforms. There were significant conceptual differences in terms of the approaches to media assistance among donors – especially between the Europeans and the Americans. This resulted in a division in the spheres of influence, with the former focusing on PSB reform and the latter emphasizing commercial media and freedom of expression. At times, these differences resulted in intense competition between donors. On a formal level, donors made attempts to coordinate their activities, but that was not an easy task to implement as they were rarely able to achieve a consensus on models of mutual cooperation. Individual donors frequently established *ad hoc* coalitions with other donors for more complex projects. Nonetheless, many practitioners and politicians have cited the lack of donor cooperation and coordination as one of the main reasons behind the ineffectiveness of programs and initiatives.

4. FINAL REMARKS AND LESSONS LEARNED

A few donors and international actors actually considered whether or not and in what ways the local context in BiH would

¹¹ Eric Martin, “Media Reform and Development in Bosnia: An Interorganizational Account of the Media Issues Group,” *South East European Journal of Economics and Business* 6, no. 1(2011), p. 92.

be able to absorb the frequently transplanted institutional models and policies implemented. The detrimental effects of the absence of an ‘enabling environment’, an undeveloped market, and the persistence of old undemocratic practices of political elites were largely underestimated. In that respect, the case of BiH presents a set of important lessons for media assistance efforts that have broader relevance:

- First, a strategic approach and long-term commitment are among the key preconditions for sustainable reforms. If donors pull out of reforms too early, the achieved results may be annulled or severely limited by different contextual factors.
 - The importance of carefully selecting and adapting the introduced institutional models and policies cannot be overstated. The proposed solutions should not be simply copied from other contexts, but must be adjusted to local circumstances.
 - In order to achieve financial sustainability, newly-introduced institutions need sufficient time to develop and implement adequate financing models. It is therefore essential to be aware of the challenges that a weak, underdeveloped market may pose to achieving financial sustainability. This also means that longer-term financial commitment of donors is likely to be needed.
 - There is an imperative for more intense and careful engagement with local political elites, whose interests should not be ignored. Any proposed solution must take into account how it might disrupt existing power relations, potentially causing prolonged resistance to reforms by local elites. In such cases, donors should develop strategies on how to counteract such a resistance, and ensure sustainability of the reforms in the long run.
- All this then strongly points to the need for prolonged international monitoring and scrutiny of government actions in respect to the reformed media institutions in order to give more time and space for those institutions to become established.
 - Furthermore, there is a need for close cooperation with the local media community from the early stages of assistance efforts in order to incorporate context-specific knowledge into the proposed solutions, and to ensure local ownership and support for the reforms.
 - Last but not least, donor coordination might be of particular importance especially when focused on specific projects. Its effect might be significant in terms of pulling together financial resources and expertise, but also in exercising stronger pressure in order to obtain support from local elites and other stakeholders.

The experience from BiH demonstrates that media reform is a slow, time-consuming process, which is closely related to the consolidation of democratic institutions that foster free media. There is a deep tension between externally-driven reform initiatives and a democratization agenda on the one hand, and the complex set of contextual challenges to reforms on the other. The future of the introduced media institutions and policies will largely depend on the development of the local political culture – a process that is slower than a systemic change.¹² This discrepancy between cultural and systemic change must be recognized by the international community and media development agencies and donors as one of the core challenges for the sustainability of the media assistance efforts in BiH and in similar contexts.

¹² Karol Jakubowicz and Miklos Sükösd, “Twelve Concepts Regarding Media System Evolution and Democratization in Post-Communist Societies,” in *Finding the Right Place on the Map: Central and Eastern European Media Changes in a Global Perspective*, ed. Karol Jakubowicz and Miklos Sükösd (Bristol; Chicago: Intellect, 2008), pp. 22-23.

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For more information
please contact:

Analitika – Center for
Social Research
www.analitika.ba
info@analitika.ba

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