# Working Paper

**MARK THOMPSON**

Looking for Shortcuts?
Assistance to – and
Development of – Public
Service Broadcasting
in Bosnia-Herzegovina,
Serbia, Kosovo,
Macedonia, and Albania

# Looking for Shortcuts?

Assistance to – and Development of – Public Service Broadcasting in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania

Mark Thompson

**ANALITIKA**
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# 1.

# Introduction

If we were asked to invent a form of media assistance which combined the maximum number of challenges, it would be hard to imagine anything more formidable than the task of establishing public service broadcasters in transitional (newly democratic) states. When those states are recovering from profound trauma or systemic breakdown, the odds against success become even greater. And when the trauma involved interethnic bloodletting on a vast scale, in which neighbouring countries were complicit, and which was ended only by external intervention by yet other countries, the chances of decisive success become incalculably small.

Let me list some challenges – with no certainty that the list is complete.

A public service broadcaster (PSB) produces, commissions, and disseminates a range of contents to a universal (non-niche) audience. It has to be enabled and supported by an appropriate legal and regulatory framework, one which entrusts it with a public service mission, establishes suitable mechanisms for funding and accountability while protecting it from interference by parliament and government.

It needs to provide a range of programs that "inform, educate and entertain" (the famous mantra) all sectors of the population, aiming for excellence in all strands, skilful enough to blend more rarefied output with populist material, juggling the schedule to reach large audiences with high-quality news and information.

It needs to be funded by a mechanism that engages the public (such as the licence fee), on a generous scale and with a stability that allows it to fulfil its mission and to invest for the future.

It needs to be technically well-equipped and resourced. If it cannot deliver excellent programmes to the entire population through broadcasting and online, the public is unlikely to wish to sustain it.

From all this, it follows that the providers of such assistance need to be prepared to engage on many fronts – journalistic, technical, institution-building, political – and to spend lavishly, with no expectation of rapid results.

- They need to have the stamina for a lengthy – perhaps endless – political and diplomatic struggle with local elites who will be reluctant to support a project that threatens to take away an important lever of influence; and with a media industry that is likely to resist this non-commercial intruder.
- They will need to be ready to persuade media professionals and the wider public why they should support a kind of media output which may be unknown in their own language.

- They will need to invest in institution-building and professionalization: training journalists, editors and managers to fulfil their distinctive mandates in a PSB.
- They need to provide technical assistance at a high level for producing and disseminating content on several platforms.
- The prospect of a strong institution devoted to public service provision in the media provokes more or less acute anxiety and resistance among the political class. The preparation and adoption of a suitable legal and regulatory framework – one that provides political and public accountability on one hand, and denies the scope for political manipulation on the other – calls for appropriate international expertise, sensitively offered, and also for dialogue with law-makers, media professionals, and civil society groups.

Finally, the suppliers of such assistance must be prepared for a long and patient (but also vigilant) engagement which may fail even after the actual steps have been taken. For laws can be enacted and not implemented. Journalists can be trained only to find they are unable or disinclined to exercise their new skills in the given conditions. Outlets can be brought into existence but then fail to find a loyal audience. Codes of ethics and self-regulatory mechanisms can be introduced and fail to make an impact on actual practice.

This having been said, it is obvious why the endeavour to establish PSBs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania faced immense difficulties. The country studies in this project, "Development of Functional Media Institutions in Western Balkans – A Comparative Study", confirm this in useful ways. They also deepen our understanding of the ways in which assistance to PSBs links with assistance to other sectors of the media.

# 2.

# Why PSB Matters

Before we look more closely at these country studies and draw some conclusions from their findings, it is worth remembering why public service broadcasting has been – and, despite everything, still remains – a central objective of media development, and of democratic reform more broadly, in south-eastern Europe.

One reason is that public service broadcasting features in European intergovernmental treaties and other documents as a pillar of democracy, "directly related to the democratic, social and cultural needs of each society" and to the need to preserve media pluralism, "an element of social cohesion, a reflection of cultural diversity and essential factor for pluralistic communication accessible to all". All the member states of the European Union, the Council of Europe, and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe have undertaken to support public service broadcasting and ensure that it can operate with financial autonomy and editorial independence.[1] It follows that the governments of the countries in this study have made relevant commitments that they should respect.

However, given the generally apathetic commentary that nowadays surrounds public service broadcasting – in which it is represented as a drain on resources, a hindrance to the more dynamic private sector, an anachronism that belongs to a bygone age of analogue austerity – it is easy to forget that the European emphasis on public service broadcasting is much more than a 'politically correct' ritual, divorced from measurable benefits. For PSB can be shown to bring concrete benefits to the media and society.[2]

- PSBs show more of certain important categories of content – news and current affairs, arts, culture, education – than commercial broadcasters; and the more public money a PSB receives, the more output it shows in these categories.
- The news and current affairs output of PSBs is more likely than commercial news and current affairs to be 'hard' rather than 'soft'.

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[1]   The quotations are from the Protocol on the System of Public Broadcasting, attached to the EU Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), and the Council of Europe's Seventh Ministerial Conference on Mass Media Policy (Kiev), 2005. See Sandra Bašić-Hrvatin and Mark Thompson, "Public Service Broadcasting in Plural and Divided Societies", in *Divided They Fall: Public Service Broadcasting in Multi-Ethnic States* ed. Sandra Bašić-Hrvatin, Mark Thompson and Tarik Jusić (Sarajevo: Mediacentar, 2008).

[2]   The following points are adapted from Dr Chris Hanretty's comparative study, *Public Service Broadcasting's Continued Rude Health* (London: British Academy, 2012).

- PSBs broadcast more domestic content than commercial broadcasters: they contribute more to local or national production.

- PSBs have been shown (in certain circumstances) to drive up the standards of quality across an entire media system.

- A good PSB can increase the level of voter turnout in elections. A 2009 study of 74 countries found that each percentage increase in the audience share of the PSB correlated with an increase of 0.15 percent in turnout, after accounting for a host of other variables (including compulsory voting, party funding, and the electoral system in use).

- Comparative research into levels of political knowledge across Europe, during two waves of European Parliament elections (measured in terms of respondents' ability to identify political parties' allegiances on the political spectrum) found that exposure to PSB news broadcasts increased political knowledge among all sections of the population – even those with low levels of interest in politics.

# 3.

# Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina lacks essential conditions to establish viable public service broadcasting.

The country's post-communist transition, around 1990, was blocked by the eruption of Europe's worst conflict since 1945. The armistice which ended the war in autumn 1995 established a constitutional and governance system which allotted very extensive powers to three nationalities or ethnicities: Bosniak (or Muslim), Croat, and Serb.

The political leaders of these national groups continue to compete jealously, locked in zero-sum rivalry over state assets, maintaining their respective power-bases at whatever cost to the viability of state bodies, often preferring to obstruct moves which they are unable to control for their own benefit. The international community has sometimes overcome a deadlock in a strategic area of public policy by imposing a solution. One of these areas is public service broadcasting: between 1998 and 2002, the international 'viceroy' in Sarajevo, the High Representative, imposed a state-wide PSB on the two self-governing "entities". Hence the country has three PSBs: one for each "entity" and another for the state as a whole: Radio-Television of Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (RTVFBiH), Radio-Television of Republika Srpska (RTRS), and Radio-Television of Bosnia-Herzegovina (BHRT). These systems overlap and compete in wasteful and mutually harmful ways.

Divided ethnically, by political party loyalties, and ultimately by family or clan bonds, public space in Bosnia and Herzegovina is cleft in so many antagonistic ways that politically neutral institutions can hardly emerge; if they do succeed in emerging, they are not willingly tolerated. Civil society appears by and large to be demoralised and disoriented – except when mobilised around an issue related to the war that almost destroyed their country. The ethnic leaders are skilled at justifying their self-interested obstructionism with reference to the great national causes of the 1990s.

International support has been decisive, for example, in sustaining the converged media and telecoms regulator, but even this support has not induced the elected political leaders to appoint a new director – an obligation they have refused to fulfil since 2007.

As a result of international pressure, Bosnia and Herzegovina today has a framework of media laws and regulations that are in line with international standards, as required by the Council of Europe. What is lacking is the will to implement those laws and regulations in good faith.

In their study, Tarik Jusić and Nidžara Ahmetašević identify the key breakthroughs and stumbling blocks in the development of public service broadcasting since

1995. Perhaps the most important obstacle has been the impossibility of establishing a public service broadcasting Corporation which was intended – under legislation adopted in 2005 – to coordinate the three distinct PSBs as well as "manage the equipment and the transmission network, and be in charge of sales and advertising."[3] Eight years on, this corporation has not been established, due to successful resistance by the two "entity" PSBs as well as the usual political hostility to unifying, state-building measures of almost any kind. (We may speculate that ethnic leaders – especially in the Serb "entity", the Republika Srpska – who still resent the survival of a converged regulator are determined to forestall the construction of a similar institution for public service broadcasting.)

In conclusion, the authors diagnose "a general absence of clear strategy for the reform" of the pan-Bosnian PSB "that would correspond with the local political and administrative context."[4] In other words, the envisaged model ignores local realities on so many levels that it cannot be fully established, let alone sustained. The authors are also correct when they suggest that the international community has abdicated prematurely from the task.

It is helpful to bring in some other recent research into television in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is a study by Amer Džihana, Kristina Ćendić and Meliha Tahmaz, as part of a major comparative project by the Open Society Foundations. Called "Mapping Digital Media", this project researches the impact on digitisation and new media on the production and consumption of news, in some 50 countries around the world.[5]

Džihana, Ćendić and Tahmaz find that television continues to be the most used and also the most trusted medium. On the PSB system, they say:

> Only the national public broadcaster covers most of the country [among terrestrial broadcasters], reaching about 89.3 percent of the population. Radio-Television of Republika Srpska (*Radio Televizija Republike Srpske,* RTRS) in Republika Srpska and Radio-Television of Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (*Radio Televizija Federacije Bosne i Hercegovine,* RTVFBiH) in the Federation of BiH are aimed primarily at their respective entities, where RTVFBiH covers 89 percent of the population of the Federation, while RTRS reaches 94 percent of the population of the Republika Srpska.

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[3]  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).

[4]  Ibid.

[5]  Amer Džihana, Kristina Ćendić and Meliha Tahmaz, *Mapping Digital Media: Bosnia and Herzegovina* (London: Open Society Foundations, 2012). (The author of this chapter, Mark Thompson was involved in designing, commissioning and publishing the Mapping Digital Media research.)

The total audience share for the three PSBs has fallen: "the audience share of the most successful public broadcaster, Federal Television (TVFBiH), has decreased by almost two-thirds in the past decade, with commercial television stations picking up the spoils." Even so, TVFBiH remains the most popular of the three PSBs.

Their analysis of local resistance to public service broadcasting deserves quotation at some length:

> Ethnic divides in BiH have strongly affected the very concept of the public interest, redefining it along ethnic lines. Therefore, the entire PSB development is primarily determined by questions on what each ethnic community will get … In practical terms, Serbs in BiH seem the most reluctant to pay when it comes to the idea of an all-Bosnian public service … On the other hand, the Croats in BiH largely refuse to pay the fee because they believe that the existing channels are not theirs. Eventually, as the statistics for 2010 show, Bosniaks also started to evade paying license fees. … The Serbian side does not seem interested in the existence of a broadcaster and corporation at state level, the Croatian side insists on the establishment of an exclusively Croatian broadcaster, and the Bosniak side is resistant to change as it fears that this would lower the income of the Federal Television, over which they have control.

In sum, there is no agreement between politicians – or across society as a whole – about the desirability of public service broadcasting, let alone about what sort of PSB should be constructed.

## Looking ahead

The story of PSB failure in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been told many times; it is, by this stage, wearily familiar. Deadlock has become a way of life. Nothing would be more shocking, today, than a declaration that the three ethnic leaderships agree to respect the law of the land by permitting the state-level broadcaster and corporation to operate efficiently and effectively, in the public interest.

Since the European Union succeeded the Office of the High Representative in 2011 as the leading international organ in Bosnia and Herzegovina, nothing much has changed in respect of public service broadcasting. However, it may be that the last and best hope for significant reform lies in the conditionality that will be attached to country's bid for accession to the European Union. For nothing less than EU membership could provide an incentive for the political elites to overcome their dislike of PSB.

It is not yet clear when the negotiations will commence. When that time comes, the terms should include robust requirements for the complete establishment of independent, sufficiently funded PSB at the state level.

# 4.

# Serbia

The state broadcaster, Radio-Television of Serbia (*Radio-televizija Srbije*, RTS), was converted by law into a public service broadcaster in 2006. More precisely, it became two PSBs: one for Serbia, and the other for the northern province of Vojvodina.

Unlike its equivalents in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Macedonia, RTS had not lacked basic resources during the 1990s, when the regime of Slobodan Milošević ensured that RTS had the means to dominate Serbia's audiovisual landscape with its propagandist output. Even so, the station was badly run down by the time of NATO's bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999, which devastated the RTS infrastructure. (The campaign included a highly controversial attack on RTS headquarters in Belgrade, which left 16 staff members dead.)

As Davor Marko shows in his report[6], only after the fall of Milošević did it become possible for the international community to engage with the Serbian authorities on media reform. Until then, international assistance to Serbian media took the form of direct support to a range of independent (in reality, oppositional) outlets. In the late 1990s, this support was lavish in scale, reflecting the international community's wish to weaken public support for the regime. The best known of the beneficiaries was Radio B92. In October 2000 – the month of Milošević's fall – TV B92 started broadcasting. It modelled itself on Channel 4 in the UK.

In the context of the new government's strategic ambition to move towards membership of the European Union, Serbia commenced the intergovernmental dialogue over media reform that neighbouring countries had begun years before. The OSCE mission to Serbia, established in 2001, became an influential partner in this dialogue, along with the Council of Europe. International experts came to Belgrade to help design new legislation. On the local side, civil society organisations got involved with proposals and initiatives of their own.

The transformation of RTS into a PSB was stipulated as an aim of EU engagement with Serbia. International support took the form of external audits, technical

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[6]    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).

assistance, training in journalism and management, various kinds of expertise, sales and marketing. This input has improved journalism and production standards.

Content monitoring has not been continuous or systematic, so it is hard to know whether RTS's output fulfils its public service mission. According to the Mapping Digital Media report on Serbia, RTS1 (the first channel, which carries the main news and current affairs programmes) increased its ratings significantly from 2005 to 2009. "RTS1 news is the most watched output of its kind in Serbia and *Dnevnik 2*, the mid-evening bulletin, is the most watched news program in the country."[7] RTS is widely considered to have the best quality news of any Serbian television station. Despite some concerns about the harmful effects of commercialisation on RTS output, the broadcaster retains substantial public trust as a news provider. Stable funding, however, remains a huge problem.

As a consequence, RTS is permanently overdrawn; it appeared to have a shortfall of €25 million in 2011 (gap between operating budget and revenue).[8] The currently favoured solution is for RTS to be funded from the government budget.

As for the independence of the PSB, it is upheld in law but not safeguarded in practice. An assessment of Serbia's media landscape, prepared in 2012 for several civil society organisations,[9] found that no institution or office is responsible for ensuring RTS's independence from political interference. (The institution which could be charged with this responsibility, the Public Broadcasting Agency, is *not* so charged.)

Public accountability mechanisms, Marko says, "are still missing", with the result that RTS "often appears as a one-man company, led by its director general", the seemingly indispensable Aleksandar Tijanić. Moreover, RTS has refused to comply with access to information legislation.[10]

In sum, Marko maintains that, notwithstanding the improvements at RTS, "there are still some topics and issues that should not be reported" – for political reasons. "It seems that the limited editorial independence of RTS is a result of strong clientelistic ties between the management and the political and business elites … Consequently, those elites … define what public interest is"[11].

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[7]    Jelena Surčulija, Biljana Pavlović and Đurđa Jovanović Padejski, *Mapping Digital Media: Serbia* (London: Open Society Foundations, 2011).

[8]    Jovanka Matić, *Serbian Media Scene vs. European Standards: Report based on Council of Europe's Indicators for Media in a Democracy.* (Belgrade: The Civil Rights Defenders, 2012).

[9]    Ibid.

[10]    Marko, "Media Reforms in Turbulent Times."

[11]    Ibid.

## Looking ahead

Under Milošević, RTS played an infamous role.[12] International assistance to Serbian media was limited to supporting independent outlets which struggled to counteract the influence of RTS and to preserve public service values in the media. Since 2000, those outlets have seen the tide of external funding turn away from them and toward the very institution that symbolised the previous regime at its worst. This was inevitable, and not necessarily regrettable from the perspective of the Serbian public interest.

What is not clear, however, is whether the international engagement with reform or RTS has been sufficiently intrusive to bring the best possible results.

The question of the prerogatives and limits of structural intervention is always difficult to resolve to the satisfaction of all stakeholders. In a sovereign state, the nature of public service media is for the society itself to determine as it sees fit. (This may not be the case when sovereignty is qualified, as in postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina and postwar Kosovo.) Yet it is also true that when the state has made international commitments to provide public service media, the international community has a collective responsibility to ensure that this commitment is respected. This responsibility should be inalienable when the state is in course of establishing its institutions and its democratic credentials.

But where does this commitment end? Is it simply in the legal, nominal establishment of a PSB? Or should there be a more far-reaching requirement to ensure the delivery of accurate, comprehensive, high-quality news and current affairs – in other words, the kind of output by which any PSB should be judged? In the Serbian case, as elsewhere, the international community has settled for the first (minimal) answer. Again, the prospect of EU accession holds out the opportunity for a more exigent assessment. This opportunity should not be missed.

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[12]   This role is documented in Mark Thompson, *Forging War: the Media in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina* (London & Luton: University of Luton Press, 1999).

# 5.

# Kosovo

Kosovo is the only country in south-eastern Europe with a new public service broadcaster. The opportunity for a start-up PSB was created by the circumstances of Kosovo's own creation as an independent entity in summer 1999, when the forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization took control of the territory and the United Nations provided a provisional government.

According to Naser Miftari's report, "The decision to establish RTK as a public broadcaster came from UNMIK, in other words the idea was imposed from outside."[13] Furthermore, its development during its first, formative years was "shaped according to the interests of multiple stakeholders (UNMIK, OSCE, Kosovo Assembly, Kosovo Government, political parties)"[14]. Naturally these interests did not all coincide, and the resulting tensions have been fully analysed over the years.

The international authorities were able to build a regulatory and institutional framework for RTK that conformed to international best practice, in terms of defending the PSB against direct political manipulation. More than this, international donors oversaw the PSB content in its entirety. The European Broadcasting Union, the BBC, Fondation Hirondelle and other outside institutions were brought in to help start radio and then television services. Japanese money rebuilt the transmitter network and equipped the studio. The scale of support was large: some €18 million had been spent on RTK by 2005, when external subsidies more or less ended.

Miftari's account of RTK makes melancholy reading, for it shows how Kosovo's political class pushed out the international organisations that were more or less committed to RTK's operations as a PSB and then laid siege to the broadcaster, determined to capture this important locus of political influence and social power. International involvement in RTK output ended sooner than might have been expected: "After August 2002, there were no internationals at RTK except for two international members of the RTK board."[15]

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[13]   Naser Miftari, "Starting from Scratch: The Role of Media Assistance in the Establishment of Independent Media Institutions in Kosovo," Working Paper Series on International Media Assistance in the Western Balkans, Working Paper 4/2013, prepared in the framework of the Regional Research Promotion Programme in the Western Balkans (RRPP) (Sarajevo: Analitika – Center for Social Research; Prishtina: D4D – Democracy for Development, 2013).

[14]   Ibid.

[15]   Ibid.

Under a mechanism that was put in place as international funds dried up, licence fees were collected by Kosovo's electricity utility. In 2007, however, the utility cancelled the contract and the Constitutional Court found that the collection of a licence fee was unconstitutional. Both acts stirred suspicions of political interference, especially as it was delivered in the heightened atmosphere before parliamentary elections. An impression was given that RTK's precarious autonomy was being systematically undermined. By 2010, the PSB was wholly dependent on the state budget. Under new direction, RTK no longer seeks the restitution of the licence fee.

In short, as Miftari writes, "RTK has increasingly become a focus of overlapping political, economic and other interests of multiple stakeholders who see RTK as a strategically important asset."[16] The broadcaster is constantly pressured "by politicians and their protégés seeking airtime and positive coverage"[17].

In terms of content, Miftari reports third-party assessments that changes in funding since around 2004 have coincided with changes in editorial policy. "A number of interviewees noted that between 2002-2006 when RTK was still in the process of Kosovarization it had a more balanced approach in its coverage and was less prone to being politicized. After independence the content of RTK became more uniform and the medium increasingly regarded as politicized."[18] The real break with the principle of neutrality probably came in 2007.

## Looking ahead

We cannot look forward without looking back. The history of RTK furnishes an extreme confirmation that public service broadcasting may – under extraordinary conditions, such as those pertaining under the international trusteeship in Kosovo – be installed very rapidly, without a background of negotiation in the host society; but that a genuine PSB is sustainable in a society only with a domestic environment that is politically, financially, and culturally supportive.

With hindsight, Kosovo's new political leadership would never have permitted a strong, independent PSB to survive. It was equally unthinkable that journalists and citizens would rally in significant numbers to defend PSB against the political takeover that began around 2007. The population of Kosovo had no experience of PSB, and no way of imagining that non-partisan, high-quality media were possible in their society – let alone, that they were as citizens entitled to such media. Beset with the practical challenges of living in one of Europe's poorest countries, Kosovo's citizens would surely have remained immune to appeals on behalf of RTK, even if those appeals had been made. The best prospect for improving PSB in Kosovo probably lies in modest attempts to raise the quality of important strands of production on old and new platforms.

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[16]   Ibid.

[17]   Ibid.

[18]   Ibid.

# 6.

# Macedonia

As elsewhere across post-communist Europe, external assistance to media in Macedonia focused initially on multiplying the number of outlets. For around a decade – until the country's stability was jeopardised by the crisis of 2001 – the media landscape saw a proliferation of independent broadcasters and newspapers, most of them small and unsustainable without donor funding. Donors accepted an unusual degree of coordination in their pursuit of de-monopolizing the broadcast sector. Macedonia was flooded with far more media outlets than it could possibly sustain.

Meanwhile the one-time monopolist, Macedonian Radio and Television (MRTV), remained under close control of the government. In their study, Tamara Dimitrijevska-Markoski and Zhidas Daskalovski explain how MTV1 "is primarily focused on news, culture, education and entertainment … in the Macedonian language", MTV2 broadcasts "similar programming in the languages of the national minorities, but mainly in Albanian"[19], the language of much the most numerous minority. (At the project meeting in Sarajevo, Daskalovski called this arrangement the "ethnic division of the spoils" at MRTV.) The language split within MRTV is replicated throughout the media landscape; a few outlets that use both languages – sometimes at the encouragement of international donors – are exceptions which prove the rule.

Successive governments appeared to prefer to let MRTV decline during the 1990s, while building up new private outlets under their influence.

European Union engagement in the diplomatic search for a solution to the ethnic Albanian insurgency of 2001 led to Macedonia's fast-tracked acceptance as a potential candidate in 2003, and as a full candidate at the end of 2005. This had a mixed impact on media assistance: EU candidacy added to the pressure on the authorities to respect Council of Europe standards in the media field, but it also led to an exodus of donors who believed the EU would take care of the remaining problems. (The worsening situation of the media since 2010 has seen a slow and partial return by donors.)

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[19] Tamara Dimitrijevska-Markoski and Zhidas Daskalovski, "Assisting Media Democratization after Low-Intensity Conflict: The Case of Macedonia," Working Paper Series on International Media Assistance in the Western Balkans, Working Paper 5/2013, prepared in the framework of the Regional Research Promotion Programme in the Western Balkans (RRPP) (Sarajevo: Analitika – Center for Social Research; Skopje: CRPM – Center for Research and Policy Making, 2013).

By the time that external assistance focused on MRTV, it was in a desperate condition. According to Dimitrijevska-Markoski and Daskalovski, international efforts prioritised "enabling the legal environment, capacity building and technical assistance."[20] None of this made much difference to the broadcaster's plight. For the combination of political control and poor quality had wrecked MTV's ratings. By 2010, its audience share had fallen under 7 percent. The crisis of quality in the news performance is profound. The Broadcasting Council has criticised MRTV for lacking open debate on important topics "due to inconsistent editorial policy"[21], with the result that public service output "is not a reference point for the public."[22] Equally damning was the conclusion that "MRT is not a service that actively contributes in the production of audiovisual works and for promotion ... of the national and European cultural heritage ... and does not support the creation of domestic audiovisual works."[23]

> [T]he public generally complains about the poor quality of service, and argues that such service does not warrant their paying the tax. The production function – especially of audiovisual works such as TV films, children's programming, and TV series – is almost non-existent. On the other hand, various experts and the heads of MRT claim that the service cannot become better if funding is not secured.[24]

Consequently, as elsewhere in the region (Serbia, Montenegro, Albania), the licence fee has ceased to be a viable means of supporting PSB. MRTV depends on allocations from the government budget.

Although Macedonia's citizens have been very badly served by their PSB, public opinion appears not to have become hostile to public service media as such.[25] Rather, it is dissatisfied with the quality achieved, and with the failure to deliver quality output across the different strands of production.

One reason for the poor results was that the international support was not provided on a scale that could fundamentally change MRTV's performance. It only scratched the surface. Computerising the newsroom, developing MTV's website, and organising television archives were valuable contributions, but they did not reach to the central problems: abysmal professional standards, rock-bottom morale, and

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[20]   Ibid.

[21]   Ibid.

[22]   Ibid.

[23]   Quoted in Roberto Belicanec and Zoran Ricliev, *Mapping Digital Media: Macedonia* (London: Open Society Foundations, 2012).

[24]   Ibid.

[25]   Ibid.

incessant political interference (visible in, for example, the high turnover of senior managers).

Another reason was that the reform agenda in post-crisis Macedonia was so extensive – addressing the civil service, the police, local government, and education – that it was hard to win political attention for MRTV, and even harder for CSOs to persuade international organisations that Macedonia's leaders should be pressured over media reform.

A third reason was that donor coordination over MRTV was lacking. The United States was not interested in public service broadcasting and continued to prioritise private outlets. The USA remains hugely important as a diplomatic player in Macedonia and the region; its indifference to MRTV may have encouraged the government to reject European advice about how best to fund the PSB.

Above all, this assistance had no impact on political influence ("the biggest threat to the development of MRTV"[26]) or on its dysfunctional funding mechanism.

## Looking ahead

Under its current government, there seems very little prospect of substantial reform at MRTV; even the incentive of EU accession may not suffice. The problem of political influence at MRTV cannot be tackled by the international community over the heads of Macedonia's political class.

As and when the door does open again, thought should be given to facilitating a dialogue about PSB with experts from societies with structural resemblances to Macedonia, in terms of constitutional, ethnic and linguistic cleavages. Advisors from Swiss, Belgian or Netherlands PSB might get a better purchase on local realities than advisors from the UK.

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[26]  Dimitrijevska-Markoski and Daskalovski, "Assisting Media Democratization after Low-Intensity Conflict".

# 7.

# Albania

In terms of professional standards, journalism had a greater distance to travel in Albania than in the other countries in this study. For Albania under communism was a full-blown dictatorship, ruling the most closed society in Europe, with no margin for the public expression of at least somewhat independent news or views.

"In the last 23 years," writes Ilda Londo, "Albanian media outlets and institutions have benefited from international assistance."[27] Furnished by a range of intergovernmental, international and non-governmental organisations, this assistance has, she writes, helped journalism to change "entirely". The lion's share of aid was spent on improving professional standards. This included the promotion of self-regulatory mechanisms as well as training. There was no formal coordination of aid until 2005. Since 2008, the EU has been the main donor to media and civil society.

On the negative side, the "problematic triangle of business, politics and the media"[28] remains in place. Many outlets still serve as "loudspeakers for political parties." In terms popularised by Hallin and Mancini, Albanian media "exhibit high political parallelism and external pluralism."[29] Internal pluralism – "defined as pluralism achieved within each individual media outlet or organisation" – is, by contrast, "hard to detect." What Londo calls the "transplantation" of laws from other European countries has reflected a box-ticking approach to structural reform – one in which the international side is, of course, complicit[30]. The report also diagnoses a "stagnant quality" in Albanian reporting. And, with very few exceptions, media remain unprofitable; they are cross-subsidised by their owners from their other lines of business[31].

A dire shortage of reliable data about ratings and funding makes it difficult to analyse the media sector.

Initiatives directed at the state broadcaster, Radio Televizioni Shqiptar (RTSH), have "been less substantial" than the help given to commercial media. They have consisted of training, program exchange (through the EBU), and legal expertise. This expertise

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[27]  Ilda Londo, "Limited Assistance for Limited Impact: International Media Assistance in Albania," Working Paper Series on International Media Assistance in the Western Balkans, Working Paper 2/2013, prepared in the framework of the Regional Research Promotion Programme in the Western Balkans (RRPP) (Sarajevo: Analitika – Center for Social Research, 2013).

[28]  Ibid.

[29]  Ibid.

[30]  Ibid.

[31]  Ibid.

has not always borne fruit: "some concerns of international organizations on legal provisions for RTSH independence and management have not been addressed"[32].

Londo identifies the key omission in this approach: "Long-term efforts towards reforming RTSH daily practice have been absent."[33] Her report speaks of lip-service to reform without real will on either the local or the international side.

This is the more regrettable because RTSH is the still only terrestrial broadcaster in the country that achieves close to national coverage; it reaches 80.5 percent of the territory. The extraordinary lack of data about Albanian media means that TVSH's viewing figures are unknown. Nor has research been conducted into public opinion about TVSH.

In her report for the Mapping Digital Media project, Londo states that reforms to TVSH output since 2006 – in order "to meet the demands of a broader array of social and age groups, as well as to establish a regular and systematic schedule" – have been welcomed.[34] Political bias (in favour of the governing party), however, remains; it is especially blatant during election campaigns. In its 2012 progress report on Albania, the European Commission found that "the editorial independence of the public service broadcaster has not been strengthened"[35]. The highest governing body at RTSH is the Steering Council. Its composition has "largely reflected the political climate and tensions in the country." No durable funding model has been found, to ensure that RTSH can fulfil its mission. "RTSH is still significantly dependent on funding from state budget for its operations". In sum, "A clear, long-term, and all-encompassing vision and strategy on how to reform RTSH has been lacking, both from foreign donors and from local actors."[36]

## Looking ahead

External assistance to Albania's media has been greatly affected by the violent disintegration of the former Yugoslav federation, to the north and east of the country. Media development initiatives were smaller in scale, less intrusive, and probably less coordinated by comparison. PSB reform is categorically dependent on large-scale, coordinated approaches to structural reform. As a result, these initiatives had less impact on the PSB than they should otherwise have had. Given Albanian society's acute need for a national broadcaster dedicated to public service principles, and the absence of ethnic or other innate cleavages in society, this record of under-achievement should be seen as a point of departure for future endeavours, in the context of the country's future candidacy for EU membership.

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[32]   Ibid.

[33]   Ibid.

[34]   Ilda Londo, *Mapping Digital Media: Albania* (London: Open Society Foundations, 2012).

[35]   European Commission, Albania 2012 Progress Report (Brussels: European Commission, October 10, 2012).

[36]   Londo, "Limited Assistance for Limited Impact."

# 8.

# Conclusions

"An international strategy [for media development in the Western Balkans in the 1990s] emerged piecemeal, without quite being articulated. It envisaged the creation of a mixed public-private media sphere with public service broadcasting as the hub or axis, balanced by a strong private sector, and protected by liberal laws and regulations. This normative model is something new in the region."[37]

Public service broadcasting forms an integral part of the European model of a democratic and plural media sector. This has been endorsed by the three intergovernmental organisations responsible for democratic standards and performance: the European Union, the Council of Europe, and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

State broadcasting under one-party political control was a defining feature of the authoritarian regimes in central and eastern Europe before 1989. Inevitably, then, Europe's post-communist states were expected to convert their state broadcasters into public service broadcasters. Given the prominence of these institutions in the daily lives of their citizens, their real or assumed influence over public opinion, and their role as symbols of unaccountable (if state) or democratic (if public service) power, these expectations of reform were likely to be endorsed by liberal leaders and championed by democratic activists.

Why, then, were these expectations not better fulfilled? – First, they were not codified, or specified, or timetabled. This was because the structure and operations of public service broadcasting are decided by each country. (This 'subsidiarised' approach to PSB is statutory in European Union law.) It was also because authority over media systems is a jealously guarded prerogative of sovereignty.

Second, the sources of resistance to PSB in the new democracies were multiple and strong. Resistance was active – though not necessarily overt – on the part of politicians who were reluctant to lose a traditional lever of influence, and of senior journalists who could hardly imagine not working as the clients of politicians. It was passive on the part of journalists and others in public life who did not understand what PSB meant or why they should take professional risks on its behalf. And it was

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[37]  Mark Thompson, *Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia (FYROM) and Kosovo: International Assistance to Media* (Vienna: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2000), p. 77.

abetted by the indifference of the great majority of citizens, to whom PSB meant nothing at all, and who faced a daunting range of more pressing challenges as their societies wrestled with the transition to democracy.

The Council of Europe made resources available to guide and advise the transitional states forward on the path to PSB. A range of donors offered training and technical assistance. The needs of state-to-public transition far outstripped the help that was given, however. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine any program of support that could have met the challenge of completing the root-and-branch reform of institutions with thousands of employees, entangled in very close (formal and informal) relationships with power.

Having said this much, one's assessment of the record of international assistance to public service media in south-eastern Europe depends on the frame of expectations with which we measure their performance.

Judged by the standard of Europe's half-dozen best PSBs, in the north and west of the continent, the PSBs in south-eastern Europe look pretty bad. They are more or less politically captured, under-funded, demoralised and held, for the most part, in middling-to-low esteem by their public. Their laws and structures often conform to international best practice, but laws and their implementation are two different things. As Zhidas Daskalovski said at the Sarajevo conference for this project, "donors have little influence on the implementation of laws."

Judged by the standard of the state broadcasters which they supplanted, however, the overall record looks better; not acceptable, nor perhaps even respectable, but – better. PSBs are profoundly cultural institutions, rooted in – and reflecting – the customs and values of their societies, shaped by local traditions (which include public expectations) of political power and bureaucracy, as well as those of journalism and of civil society. Given this, it would be unrealistic to expect a swift transformation, in the way that an electoral system, for example, can be transformed. (Political behaviour during election campaigns is more resistant to change, however, and provides a more accurate guide to the nature and democratic health of political life.)

In the aftermath of the historic changes that followed the breaching of the Berlin Wall by people power, 24 years ago, hopes ran high that democratic transformations in many sectors of state and social life would follow almost automatically. Media reform initiatives shared these hopes, which did not feel unrealistic because those historic changes had been heralded and driven and symbolised by the free speech of anti-communist leaders and movements across central Europe.

What followed was both disappointing and educational. Among the lessons learned was that the total transformation of a state into a public service broadcaster in a single process, over a period of a few years, should never have been an objective. While the structural reforms might in some countries be made with relative ease, the reform of managerial, editorial and journalistic practices proved doggedly resistant to change. (This is why many training programs were a waste of money and time.)

This lesson was actually learned a long while ago. Evidence that the 'heroic' phase of international assistance to PSBs ended around a decade ago is not hard to find. *Ten Years of Media Support to the Balkans: An Assessment*, a report prepared for the Stability Pact by Aaron Rhodes and published in June 2007, made no mention at all of public service broadcasting in its Conclusions and Recommendations, beyond the evasive exhortation that "Donors should emphasize the 'public service' function of media." This omission perhaps reflected a sense that the scale of the challenge was so great, and the fruits of assistance were so small, that remedies were not worth proposing.

Coming right up to date, the latest report from BBC Media Action is decidedly modest about international aspirations to improve PSB around the globe. *Fragile States: The Role of Media and Communication*, written by James Deane, reveals how the language of media intervention has changed since the 1990s, becoming more sensitive to local prerogatives, and more attentive to consultation and debate. "More creative strategies and external support will be required if national public service broadcasting systems are to be more successful in providing such platforms in the future," Deane writes.

The overall aim, in Deane's view, is to help PSBs to build "shared identity" and "support national public conversations in fragile states." Also this: "Supporting models built on public service broadcasting values to encourage a greater sense of shared identity can emerge from work with a single broadcaster or highly connected networks of private or community broadcast media."

Deane's approach shows how the debate about PSB assistance has been bruised by the recent (and ongoing) failures in Afghanistan and Iraq. But it also shows how the debate about PSB as such has evolved in its northern and western European heartland. Under the pressures of digitisation and the explosion of new platforms for media consumption, PSBs face challenges at every level, and have been forced to rethink every step of their mission.

*Creative* is a watchword of the new approach. "A sustained and creative debate on how to transform state broadcasters into public service broadcasters, or develop alternative models of national public service broadcasting, is especially necessary in fragile states." Structural transformation is no longer the game: "Public service broadcasting can work very effectively from the ground up," Deane observes – a conclusion that might surprise anyone who has worked only in south-eastern Europe, but that makes sense against the experiences in Angola, Libya, Nepal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Tunisia, Zambia and elsewhere.[38]

The key focus now is on "support for programming that is characterised by public service broadcasting values: putting the audience first, being impartial, insisting on editorial independence, building trust and being creative." Good-quality public

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[38]  See James Deane, *Fragile States: the Role of Media and Communication* (London: BBC Media Action, 2013), p. 23.

service content can be inserted into a PSB schedule regardless of the general quality of output, and without seeking to reform the institution.[39]

To what extent this approach has been tried in south-eastern Europe is not wholly clear from these reports. Perhaps not much.

At this stage, negotiations for EU accession hold out the only prospect of concerted international endeavours to put public service broadcasting on a secure footing in south-eastern Europe. For EU membership is the only incentive in view that could induce these governments to release their national broadcasters from close oversight. The European Commission seems aware that previous accession negotiations – leading to the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007 – did not go far enough in leveraging structural reform in the media sector. Presumably the local authorities pretended they were committed to public service broadcasting, and the European Commission officials pretended to believe them.

Yet it would be rash to expect too much improvement next time. In summer 2013, DG Enlargement convened a consultative conference called Speak Up!, which agreed a number of broad aims including this:

### Renewing the reform commitment of Public Service Broadcasters

The partnership established between the European Commission and European Broadcasting Union (in 2012) in an attempt to help Public Media in the Enlargement region should be supported by a strong national commitment to the needed reform of Public Service Broadcasters. Achieving their political independence, financial autonomy and sustainability, as well as defining the tasks under the public service remit, should be orientations of this reform.

If this is an accurate measure of international commitment to PSB in candidate states, then the political elites in south-eastern Europe have little to worry about. The European Commission should not bind itself too closely to the EBU, which has been prevented by its own multilateral structure and bureaucratic outlook from confronting the crisis of public service media in central and eastern Europe.

There are, then, no shortcuts. If public service broadcasting ever takes root, it will be as the result of society's own determination to make it work.

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[39]    Another indication of this changed – diminished but, undeniably, more realistic – approach is found in *Developing Independent Media as an Institution of Accountable Governance: a How-To Guide*, written by Shanthi Kalathil for the World Bank. Referring *en passant* to "reforming the state broadcaster into a public service broadcaster" as one possible aim of media development, Kalathil notes coolly – and correctly – that it does not "produce lots of outputs". The report omits, however, to explore the effect of that lack of output on donor decisions, to critique efforts to date, or to propose more effective approaches.

# 9.

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# About the Author

Mark Thompson works on media policy, writes books, and teaches. His experience includes journalism, translation, and policy analysis for the United Nations. *The White War*, about Italy in the First World War, was awarded the PEN Hessell-Tiltman Prize and runner up for the Orwell Prize. His most recent book is *Birth Certificate. The Story of Danilo Kiš* (Cornell University Press, 2013). He works in London and in Oxford.

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