

FOREIGN INFLUENCE OVER MEDIA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Desislava Sotirova. Foreign Influence over Media in the Western Balkans

Abstract: Media freedom in Western Balkan countries has been restricted for years, and the authority of the journalistic profession has been systematically undermined. Apart from pressure from governments, political and economic circles, the media in the region are also susceptible to foreign influences. The article analyzes the vulnerability of media in Western Balkan countries to third-party influence driven by cash flows. Prerequisites are presented that increase the possibility of direct intervention in editorial policy. Interference that results in biased coverage, the spread of misinformation or the formation of certain attitudes among the audience. Answers are sought to the questions: what are the motives of foreign governments to sponsor media and “causes” in the countries of the Western Balkans, what is the nature of the funding – secret or public?

Keywords: media, influence,

The media landscape in the Western Balkan countries – Republic of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Republic of Kosovo, Republic of North Macedonia¹, Republic of Serbia, is marked with serious challenges that threaten media freedom. The media in the region have similar weaknesses as the media in some European Union members (for example Bulgaria, Hungary). But some are a bit deeper and more complicated taking the fact that the Western Balkan countries² are at the same time post-war³ (except for Albania) and post-socialist states.

The main weaknesses that can cause dependence and are factors affecting the editorial content:

¹ In 2022 Republic of Bulgaria recognizes the country with the name North Macedonia, while the Macedonian authorities assure the United Nations that they have no territorial claims to Bulgaria. For that reason in this article the country is called also North Macedonia.

² None of them has yet been accepted as a member of the EU. Montenegro, Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia are candidate countries for EU membership with opened accession negotiations, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidates.

³ The wars in former Yugoslavia in the 90's in the 20 Century.

- Low payment in the media industry;
- Dependence on advertising or country aid;
- Pressure from the ruling party or political/economic circles;
- Ownership.

The foreign influence of another government can be proceeded in many ways – through financial flows or the purchase of media by a person or a group connected to or inclined to be benevolent to the ruling political party. Even media ownership concentration in a particular country could be a factor for influence. A paper published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2017 concludes that ‘ownership concentration threatens the ability of the media system as a whole to reflect the variety of ideas, viewpoints and opinions that exist in society and to represent all political, cultural social groups’⁴. The concerns are even bigger in those countries with weak rule of law and lack of good governance ‘where media owners are prepared to use their clout for political ends, this can unbalance checks and balances and lead to undemocratic results’⁵. One possible consequence of such attitude is misleading the audiences ‘when television executives [or other types of mass media] do not explicitly state their biases, but doing their work in agreement with political and/or economic interests’⁶.

For example⁷, in 2021 when the United Media^{8,9} and the Serbian Adria Media Group increased their presence in Montenegro by buying media outlets. Both of these media groups are independent and privately owned but their Serbian

⁴ MENDEL, Toby, Ángel García CASTILLEGÓ, Gustavo GÓMEZ. Concentration of Media Ownership and Freedom of Expression: Global Standards and Implications for the Americas. UNESCO 2017. P. 11. Available from: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/in/documentViewer.xhtml?v=2.1.196&id=p::usmarcdef_0000248091&file=/in/rest/annotationSVC/DownloadWatermarkedAttachment/attach_import_f577db9e-bf64-4724-ba50-be797dc87057%3F_%3D248091eng.pdf&updateUrl=updateUrl5649&ark=/ark:/48223/pf0000248091/PDF/248091eng.pdf.multi&fullScreen=true&locale=en#%5B%7B%22num%22%3A24%2C%22gen%22%3A0%7D%2C%7B%22name%22%3A%22XYZ%22%7D%2C0%2C842%2Cnull%5D.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 12.

⁶ СОТИРОВА, Десислава. Отношенията между телевизите и властта в държавите от Западните Балкани. *Журналистика, ценности, свят. Юбилеен сборник в чест на проф. д-р Мария Нейкова*. София: УИ „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2022, с. 40.

⁷ The article does not claim that the examples given are comprehensive and exhaustive.

⁸ According to the public information the United Group, part of which is United Media, is based in the Netherlands and is ‘a multi-play telecoms and media provider in South East Europe’, operating in 8 countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia. Its connection with Serbia is through Serbian Dragan Šolak who founded United Group in 2000, a few years later appointed as a Chairman of the Board. Šolak contributed to the development of the company making it one of the regional leaders delivering broadband, mobile, and pay-TV services.

⁹ The United Media is the current owner of the Bulgarian Nova Broadcasting Group managing Radio and TV channels such as NOVA News, Diema, The Voice Radio&TV, Trace Sport Stars, Magic FM&TV, Radio Vitosha, Radio Veselina, etc.

links have raised concerns. The ruling political party in Serbia – Serbian Progressive Party, whose leader is the current Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, has considerable influence over the country’s media industry. One of the used methods¹⁰ of limiting freedom of speech in Serbia, and more precisely – limiting criticism against authorities, is the weaponization of state advertising, as the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism called it. In Serbia, government-friendly media receive ‘lucrative advertising contracts from state-run utility companies, while independent newspapers struggle’¹¹.

The relationship between media and government has a profound impact on the information to which the public has access. It also determines the pluralism¹² and the degree of bias in presenting news. Gina Baleria concludes that ‘bias influences the stories journalists choose to cover; the sources they choose to interview or include - or exclude; the words chosen to tell a story; the chosen visuals; the time and space allotted; and the placement of the story on the page, on the website, or in the newscast’¹³. Although she talks about objectivity in journalism which, for her, is unattainable as human nature is subjective. But when it comes to politically biased media coverage one of the most important, fair and responsible deeds is not bringing under the audiences by making bias public.

Influence through financial flows

The financial flows could be operated for example through funds: secret or public. The USA, the EU support funds for media development in the Western Balkan countries, China and Turkey maintain close cooperation with the media industry in the region. Russia for example has significant influence over Serbian media. But there is still no evidence, at least with public access, that Russia paid for positive media coverage in foreign country/ies in the region.

But the existence of secret funds for foreign media raises questions about the purpose of these funds. It is publicly known that in 2018 the Greek government,

¹⁰ SELVA, Meera. *Fighting Words: Journalism Under Assault in Central and Eastern Europe*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2021, p. 10. Available from: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-01/MSelva-Journalism_Under_Assault_FINAL_0.pdf.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

¹² ОГНЯНОВА, Нели. *Медийна политика и право на Европейския съюз*. София: УИ „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2014.

¹³ BALERIA, Gina. (2021, September 15). *What is neutrality bias, and why do we need to address it?* Available from: <https://www.routledge.com/blog/article/what-is-neutrality-bias-and-why-do-we-need-to-address-it>.

and to be more specific the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹⁴, paid from a secret fund to online portals, media and journalists in North Macedonia and Albania. The Greek media published information it claimed was taken from a recent Foreign Office's report submitted to Parliament on the spending of the secret funds. It was explained that the aim was to have positive media coverage about Greece and to ensure lobbying among local journalists and media representatives in favor of Greek interests. As the media informed, in the original document are pointed out three account codes for expenses up to 1 million euros. The first code refers to the funds allocated to the media in Albania. The second code is about funds provided for media in North Macedonia. The third code refers to funds intended to support Orthodox churches and Orthodoxy in general.

According to information in Tirana Times, citing the Greek Foreign Ministry: 'a big part of the money was given through grants and assistance to different regional media and organizations to pay off journalists, portals and other figures in Albania and North Macedonia'¹⁵. It is also suspected that Albanian and Macedonian media and journalists have profited millions of euros over the years.

The then-Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras¹⁶ called the action 'undermining of the country's foreign policy' and the Speaker of the Hellenic Parliament, Nikos Voutsis¹⁷, expressed indignation at the leak of information in the press about the secret expenses of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹⁸.

This disclosure happened in parallel with the Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras' name deal with Macedonia amid mass protests in Greece against the agreement. In 2018 Macedonia was about to change its name to North Macedonia. Then the Macedonian Prime Minister was Zoran Zaev¹⁹. Thus a 27-year-long

¹⁴ The Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Kotzias resigned after a clash with the Greek Minister of Defense Panos Kammenos, head of the right-wing Independent Greeks party, a coalition partner. That was the formal explanation. Kammenos opposed the agreement with Macedonia. As a foreign minister, Kotzias was responsible for negotiating the agreement regarding the Macedonian name deal.

¹⁵ Media claims Greece funds Albanian portals and businesses following Greek FM resignation. Available from: <https://www.tiranatimes.com/?p=138955>.

¹⁶ Alexis Tsipras served two terms as Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic: the first term was from 26 January 2015 – 27 August 2015, and the second: 21 September 2015 – 8 July 2019.

¹⁷ In charge of from 4 October 2015 to 18 July 2019.

¹⁸ Атина плащала от таен фонд на меди в Албания и Македонија. Достъпно на: <https://www.mediapool.bg/atina-plashtala-ot-taen-fond-na-medii-v-makedoniya-i-albaniya-news285188.html>.

¹⁹ In charge of from 1 June 2017 - 3 January 2020.

dispute with Greece was ended and opened up²⁰ the way for the country to the EU and NATO membership (North Macedonia became a NATO member in March 2020). Greece had maintained that using the name of Macedonia implied a territorial claim to part of its northern territory because of its geographical name. The Prespa agreement was signed on 17 June 2018 and entered into force on 12 February 2019. The official document resulted in changing the name of Macedonia into North Macedonia. Until finding a consensus, the provisional reference ‘the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’ (FYROM) was used by the international community, including the United Nations.

But why will Greece need to fund causes for Orthodoxy in Albania where the majority²¹ identifies itself as Muslim? One of the possible reasons is the Greek minority in Albania who are Orthodox Christians. For years there have been tensions between Albania and Greece over the Orthodox community. Religious leaders and civil authorities accuse each other of alleged acts of violence and land ownership. These topics make the bilateral relations between Albania and Greece even more dynamic and complicated. It could be also for the sake of the splitting of the water borders in the Ionian Sea with Albania – a dispute that is still not resolved. It is also suspected that the funding has been made for not treating or leaving in silence the Cham issue - the ethnic Albanian, and predominantly Muslim, population from the area of northwestern Greece.

This short history review just gives a further context of the bilateral relations between Greece and North Macedonia at that time. It was vital for the government led by Zoran Zaev to receive the support²² of the Macedonian people in resolving the name issue. A positive media coverage of politics will result in a high probability of higher public approval. But it is also important to consider what countries we are

²⁰ In November 2020 the Bulgarian government did not support the negotiating framework for North Macedonia and blocked the country’s EU accession negotiations. There were pointed three reasons connected with the common history, the language and the Macedonian requirement for recognition of the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. Several months of tense bilateral relations followed, but despite the pressure the Bulgarian government didn’t change the categorical intention to maintain block on North Macedonia’s European integration until the disputes were solved. In June 2022, the EU offers the so-called French proposal: that the Bulgarian demands to North Macedonia become part of Skopje’s commitments to the EU. See: СОТИРОВА, Десислава. Събитията в рамка. Медийно отразяване на евроатлантическата интеграция на Западните Балкани (1999 – 2018 г.). София: УИ „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2022.

²¹ According to statistics from latest Census in 2011, around 6% of all Albanians are Orthodox Christians. The Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania called the results of the 2011 Census regarding the Orthodox Christians in Albania as ‘totally incorrect and unacceptable’. Available from: <http://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/censuses/census-of-population-and-housing/#tab2>.

²² A referendum was held, and 90% of the voters supported changing the name. But the direct vote was legally invalid because of low voter turnout (around 36%) below the needed 50-percent bar.

talking about. According to a survey²³ of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in 2018²⁴ (when the Greek government funded foreign media) the majority of the respondents in the six Western Balkan countries totally disagree (27%) and tend to disagree (29%) that the media are independent of political influence. In opposition, only 8% totally agree and 28% answered that tend to agree with the statement. These results clearly show how low is the media trust in the region at that time (and low trust in institutions as a whole). At the same time, this example represents the weakness in the media industry – buying and selling biased media coverage with a clear consciousness of being in favor of foreign countries' interests.

In conclusion

Foreign country influence can be experienced in many ways – directly or not, secret or not. In journalism any form of interference in the editorial content could lead to biased reporting. This is why the EU perceives the concentration of media ownership as one of the biggest challenges to preserve the diversity of information and opinion in Europe. The lack of transparency in media ownership, especially in the Western Balkan region, makes it difficult to determine who owns what and complicates detecting potential media bias.

The Greek financial scandal is a indicative example of the weaknesses of media and journalists to get under influence in order to serve foreign country purposes. It shows also the importance of the international relations that can also be transferred to the media. It is not unusual for foreign countries to try to intervene in the media editorial policy in order to form the public opinion in another state. Positive media covering is a powerful tool that can benefit the country/group involved. The bias media coverage becomes a product to be sold. And raises the question of how independent are the journalists and the media in the Western Balkans (but not only there).

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²³ Balkan Barometer 2019, p. 97. Available from: https://www.rcc.int/seeds/files/RCC_BalkanBarometer_PublicOpinion_2019.pdf.

²⁴ This is not the last report by the RCC.

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