



The Civil Society Facility, Media Freedom and Accountability Programme,  
EuropeAid/134613/C/ACT/MULTI

# LOST IN TRANSITION, STUCKED BETWEEN EAST AND WEST



This project is funded by  
**The European Union**



A project implemented by  
**The Center for Independent Journalism**

## South-East European Partnership for Media Development

SEE Partnership for Media Development is implemented by a consortium of media organizations from **Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania**. Media professionals from Kosovo and Turkey will also be involved.

The Project is co-financed by the European Commission, the Civil Society Facility, Media Freedom and Accountability Programme, Europe Aid/134613/C/ACT/MULTI

The SEENPM members that are part of the project: Albanian Media Institute (Albania), Mediacenter for Media and Civil Society Development (BiH), Media Initiatives – Association for Media Development and Promotion of Professional Journalism (BiH), Macedonian Institute for Media (Macedonia), Montenegro Media Institute (Montenegro), Media Center (Serbia), Media and Reform Centre Nis (Serbia), Media Development Center (Bulgaria).

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Journalism

Address: Bd. Regina Elisabeta, no.  
32, sect V,  
050017 București/Romania  
Tel: + 4 021 311 1375  
Fax: + 4 021 311 1378

This project is funded  
by the European Union

Delegation of  
The European Union In Romania  
str. Vasile Lascar, 31, 020492  
București  
Tel: + 4 021 203 54 00  
Fax: + 4 021 316 88 08

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# LOST IN TRANSITION, STUCKED BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

AUTHOR: MLADEN VELOJIC,  
MEDIA & REFORM CENTRE NIS

BELGRADE, FEBRUARY 2017





## INTRODUCTION

Serbia is on its way to the European Union. The integration process has been ongoing for 16 years already, since the overthrowing of Slobodan Milosevic and the democratic changes that followed. During all these years, almost every Government has emphasized progress towards EU integration as one of its top priorities. However, citizens' support to Serbian EU accession is decreasing year after year. The latest poll conducted last December showed that 48% of Serbian citizens supported accession to EU<sup>1</sup>. If compared to 2004, the percentage of support decreased by 25%. This may be influenced by the new circumstances, i.e. current migration crisis and terrorist attacks all over Europe, more frequent than last year, the increase of nationalistic ideology that has led to disintegration processes such as the Brexit case and the strengthened positions of some leaders whose rhetoric errs from the values that constitute the fundament of a democratic society.

How did this happen? Why have our viewpoints changed? Was the development of a consumer's society responsible for the lack of tolerance and sensitivity to general welfare? What are the media/journalists doing under such circumstances - helping or making things more difficult? One may say that the last question is of crucial importance. One may justifiably suggest that media reports are equally causes and consequences of the current events. Technological development and the appearance of new communication platforms resulted in the increase of the population exposure to information, that is thus hard to control. With almost 1800 media outlets and 65% of Internet users among the general public - out of which 80% use social networks - as well as a large number of functionally illiterate individuals (estimated to more than 50%), Serbia is facing numerous challenges posed by the new evolutions and new social circumstances in Europe and worldwide. Additionally, one should take into consideration the still fresh memories of the period 25 years ago, during which Serbia, led by non-democratic government, faced wars on the territory of ex-Yugoslavia (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina), economic sanctions by UN, NATO bombing and the murder of Zoran Djindjic - first democratically elected Serbian Prime Minister. Should Serbia go East or West? It seems that this question has never been so frequently asked as it is nowadays. On one hand, EU integration is an integral part of the official policy of Serbian Government. On the other hand, the same Government does not want to renounce "Mother Russia" and leans toward better cooperation with "Orthodox brothers and sisters". Moreover, it is important to note that, regardless of the fact that EU is the biggest donor in Serbia, citizens believe that Russia and Japan are bigger donors than EU, while USA is not on the list of top five donors<sup>2</sup>.

## RESEARCH DATA:

The research that the oldest newspapers in Serbia, Politika, conducted in correlation with Faktor plus Agency proved increased Euroscepticism<sup>3</sup>. Namely, the results of the "New Year" research - conducted in the period 16th to 26th December 2016 - showed that 30% of Serbian citizens believed that Serbia should never join EU, which was by 16% more than the year before. Additionally, only 3% of the citizens did not answer the question, as compared to 11% the year before. This issue may be connected to citizens' attitude towards migrants. More precisely, the citizens are now less compassionate. Last year, 36% of the population stated that Serbia could permanently admit several hundred migrants, 19% said that Serbia could admit several thousand, 4% stated that Serbia could admit "as many as necessary", 18% stated that they did not know, while 23% stated that

1 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/istrazivanje-za-ulazak-u-eu-48-odsto-gradana-srbije/k7tekn8>

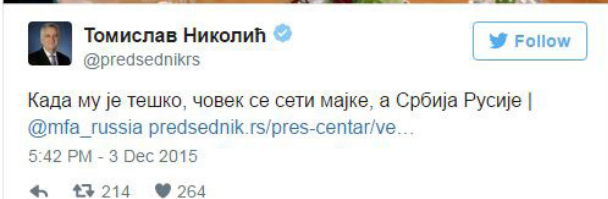
2 <http://europa.rs/files/02.12.%20istrazivanje%20pp%20s.pdf>

3 <http://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/371321/Veca-plata-najveca-zelja>

Serbia could not permanently admit migrants at all. Now, the percentage is rather different as no one said “I do not know”.

“Perhaps this is the result of Berlin tragedy that has occurred during the research. Generally speaking, this attitude is connected to migrant-related incidents in the previous year, both worldwide and in Serbia. Fear is a dominant feeling and has obviously had effect on population’s perception of migrants. They no longer see migrants as some unhappy people, but as problematic people” said Vladimir Pejic, Director of Faktor plus Agency.

Within the same research conducted by daily *Politika* and *Faktor Plus Agency*, it is worth mentioning that Serbians were asked “Which worldwide event has made the strongest impact in 2016?”. The “absolute winner” was the election of Donald Trump for USA President, with 61% of votes, then Brexit, with 61%, Fidel Castro’s death, with 43%, while terrorist attacks in Belgium and France took fourth place with only 23%. NATO missile shield activation in Romania had only 1% and was on the last position. “The answers show that many people have “sobered up” after the euphoria over Trump’s victory over Hillary Clinton, so 46% of them believe that the relation between USA and Serbia shall remain the same. When it comes to the change of presidential election system in Serbia, which has been considered in the public regarding announced amendments to Serbian Constitution<sup>4</sup>, it seems that the interviewees do not know what it is all about and actually do not really care. Additionally, they do not care much about the possibility of introducing some kind of visas for EU countries” says Pejic.



*“When hard times come, a man remembers his mother, Serbia remembers Russia” - Official twitter account of Serbian President*

Is the Serbian public ready to understand the context of international events, as well as the way international events may affect the events in our country?

Even though there are specific viewpoints, all experts we interviewed, professionals who face these questions daily, both in theory and practice, agree that the Serbian public does not show great interest in international topics, as well as that a large percentage of the Serbian audience is functionally illiterate in terms of media.

## INTERNATIONAL NEWS IN SERBIAN MEDIA

Traditional media find it hard to “cope with” the international information scene and the reason for that is routine information practice, declared Vladeta Radovic, Professor at Faculty of Philosophy in Nis, Head of Department for Journalism and Communication. Most of the TV programs grids are general and thus the content is broad and generally intended for a wide, inclusive targeted audience. He also added that in-depth analysis has been replaced with the “best-selling” sensationalistic approach to information. Ivan Protic, Belgrade Center for Human Rights’ activist, former editor-in-chief at TV B92Info and former EFE correspondent from Yugoslavia, agrees with professor Radovic, and added that media frequently use translations

4 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/promena-ustava-pred-srbijom-pitanje-svih-pitanja-sta-ce-biti-sa-preambulom-o-kosovu/8qg3dwg>

from foreign media, domestic analytics and rarely reporters on the field, and that one of the basic reasons for that is the poverty of domestic media. "Media in Serbia barely deal with international topics, unless they refer to Serbia. Newspapers and TV, except for the newspaper Politika, RTS and cable channel N1 which is CNN affiliated, do not have clearly defined foreign policy editorial staff, and only a few media, such as weekly magazine Vreme, NIN or daily Danas, do in-depth analysis of international topics" he said. Dejan Tasic, a Radio Television of Serbia (public broadcaster) journalist with many years of professional experience, stated that TVs, radio and newspapers in Serbia almost always report on world news at the level of daily events, primarily in terms of natural disasters, crime news, terrorism, presidential and parliament elections in specific countries. Communication expert Staletovi Srdjan, who is working currently as a team leader of the project "Media Trips to EU" media program of Delegation of EU in Serbia, said that when it comes to genre, it is very hard to determine "whether the news is truly news (latest events which are relevant for a specific part of the world) or units that editors select using several other criteria". In his opinion, such criteria include: "breaking news" (which could be seen in the media of other countries), "exotic news" (whale stranded on the coast, vessel from WWII discovered, Hitler's letters revealed, etc.) or "shocking news"/"attention grabbing" (child born with two heads, new crime of life-sentenced convicts revealed, etc.)

When it comes to international news in domestic media, foreign agencies, such as Reuters, AP and FP are often used as sources and the cost of the content depends on the purpose and the number of subscribers to the media. The price for this kind of services goes from 150 to 600 eur for one month. Serbian reporters are rarely on the spot, unless important national politicians participate in the event. The reason why most channels use mostly the same sources is "information inertia", concluded prof. Radovic. In terms of reports from foreign countries, sources are predominantly information agencies, correspondents or outsourced networks. Ivan Protic also added biased reports from EU headquarters in Brussels, related to the Serbian candidacy to the EU membership<sup>5</sup>, as well as from Russia, where Putin and his regime are often glorified by Serbian media<sup>6</sup>.

Another problem in the Serbian media is information contextualization for the national readership. Contextual reporting, i.e. news from the world which are put in adequate context, is present in a few domestic media. Our interviewees agreed with that and stated that the audience is rarely explained the background of an event, dispute or statement. Viewers and readers do not have a clear picture of the position of a country and most probably very few of them could explain who has participated in Afghanistan or Syrian war, how the president of USA is elected or where the Council of Europe or European Council are located and what is their purpose.

Profesor Radovic stated that the international information market in Serbia, as in other countries in the Balkans, primarily refers to the relevant international actors, i.e. influential countries, as well as to influential European circles. Any information outside this scope is, in the majority of cases, irrelevant for most Serbian media. He also explained that, in his opinion, the reason for that may be the intensive share of information from the developed part of the world, which can easily and quickly create the illusion for the Serbian public that they too live in a developed society. The importance of news in Serbia is mostly determined in relation with the political forces which are considered relevant within the editorial policy of a certain the media. Naturally, news from American and Russian political scene has its place, as well as news within the scope of EU structure and the neighboring countries. For traditional Serbian media, America and Russia are clear benchmarks on the world scene, so when it comes to political news from these countries (mainly about activities of the countries' presidents), editors look for follow-up reporting on a daily basis (even though it often does not make much sense to the domestic audience), or they analyze statements, actions and decisions of American and Russian politicians to see how they would affect Serbia. Russia, EU, USA and the countries in the region are in the focus of the reports, as their attitude has dominant impact on our domestic policy. In terms of EU countries, Germany and France are in the focus of attention, as well as Brussels as EU headquarters. "Does anyone remember reports about common people living in neighboring Romania, Czech Republic or Austria?" Dejan Tasic, RTS's reporter, asked rhetorically. There are no reports and texts which compare Serbia and countries which have undergone the process of transition and accession. There are no stories about privatization, fight against corruption, judicial reform and environmental protection in the above stated countries. Ivan Protic stated that media report about neighbors - Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina - mainly in terms of negative news, which is the result of some kind of propaganda war. Reports focus on Montenegro and Macedonia only sporadically, i.e. only in cases of elections or possible crisis. Protic also noticed that the majority of media are pro-government, and thus often offer "partial information" from around the world, i.e. only the part which supports the Government. All major worldwide events, such as the election of US president or Brexit are given large number of pages in the press, but again from the national perspective, i.e. by analyzing whether that is good or bad for Serbia.<sup>7</sup>

5 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/vol-strit-dzornal-srbija-zasluzila-da-napreduje-ka-eu/bb2mt37>

6 <http://informer.rs/vesti/politika/114125/GRMLJAVINA-KREMLJA-PUTIN-PORUCIO-ZAPADU-napadne-Srbe-napao-Ruse>

7 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/tramp-efekat-da-li-oluja-stize-u-srbiju/28k17nr>



*Vojislav Seselj, leader of ultra right-wing Serbian Radical Party, during the meeting of support to Donald Trump in August 2016*

The obvious drawback of the majority of traditional media in Serbia started 15 years ago, when the media stopped cultivating “foreign policy journalism” and diminished their editorial staff dedicated to world events, which could suggest relevance, give comments and determine the level of news importance, said Srdjan Staletovic. The media in Serbia do not have a problem with publishing news around the world, but they definitely have a problem of selection (insufficient knowledge of occurrences on the world scene in order to set up unanimously accepted criteria), a problem of context (not enough information on why the news is relevant and what the consequences of related occurrences are) and definitely a problem of understanding (editors select news based on their ratings in other media which editors find relevant, without the author’s approach and clear understanding of the event relevance), explained Staletovic.

## **OPINION, OPINION LEADERS AND INTERNATIONAL CURRENT AFFAIRS**

Commentaries related to world news are very rare in traditional media information programs. The world news segment in electronic media is reduced to minimum (only basic information, usually directly translated from the original sources). Even if there is a comment, it is usually “borrowed or copied” from some international sources (agencies, TV stations). Discussing this topic, prof. Radovic raises the question of media literacy. He states that even when comments are based on facts, the facts are not in the focus of attention, because on this level of media literacy, the function of comment is rather to influence, than to provide an expert interpretation, as the nature of this journalistic genre would require.

Protic said that commentaries are rarely present, and that they are not based on facts, but on the author’s preferences. He also adds that in the tabloid media, which are predominant in Serbia, commentaries are either glorification or hate speech. Traditional media in Serbia have the habit of using expressions from the previous journalism era when freedom of speech and diversity of opinions were not appreciated as nowadays. Also, comments related to Croatian right-wing movements (Ustasha, etc.), attempts to connect them with official politics and commentaries without any solid evidence can be found in the newspapers *Informer* and *Vecernje novosti*. And could be treated as engaged journalism, which is publicly supported by political structures in Serbia, including the Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic. Except for the parts of the world that are interesting for Serbia (Kosovo, Croatia, Bosnia, occasionally Montenegro and Macedonia), there is no hate speech in the international news reports and comments, Staletovic declared. However, he said, when it comes to regions which are within the scope of Serbian interest, hate speech and public instigations are predominant. Prof. Radovic, on the other hand, said that in terms of tolerance and suppression of hate speech, significant improvements are visible. However, he added, “tolerance in information field, as well as any other long-term process, is to be nurtured, encouraged and, let’s say - rewarded”.

In terms of EU and EU policy topics, Serbian media refrain from commenting decisions, procedures and statements of EU officials (except in cases of direct disagreement with the policy of the Serbian Government). Numerous comments of pro-government media from Serbia attributed to some EU officials (commissioners, PRs, various officials) personal features and esoteric reasons for being in favor of solutions which are contrary to the solutions the media favoured by the media. By such actions, part of pro-government media in Serbia has strengthened hate speech, depicted resolutions of international factors (especially EU officials) as premature and suggested that personal decisions are motivated by favoring the side which is opposed



to Serbia and supporting the interests which are against Serbia, Staletovic thought. These comments often have an insulting note (Informer: “the cow of Croatian president”, Vecernje novosti “proved Ustasha promoter”, etc.). Also, there are many comments on Brussels actions, especially in terms of negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo. In the majority of cases, the texts look like cheering writing which includes statements from Serbian participants, so the audience often does not understand what is really happening.

As for the most influential voices in public space, the journalists’ influence in Serbia is decreasing, especially for those journalists who are not specialized in a specific area. Academic public can only act ad hoc, while politicians have impact on targeted public. Political analysts could maintain their influence only if they are “omnipresent in the media, as” analysts of general practice”, i.e. “analysts” of specific interest groups. Politicians, analysts of questionable credibility and tabloid journalists have the greatest impact on public opinion in Serbia, said prof. Radovic, and Protic agreed saying that naturally, politicians are most influential, then a group of analysts who are close to the authorities. He also adds that real analysts and experts for specific fields appear rarely in few critically oriented media. Communication expert Srdjan Staletovic partially agrees, and adds that in Serbian media there are no journalists who know foreign policy as a discipline or follow regularly world news. Additionally, the number of commentators and authentic professionals who know all about journalistic approach to international events is negligible. Except for two journalists of newspaper Politika (Bosko Jaksic and Miroslav Lazanski) and editor of Svet at RTS (Branka Kerkez), said Staletovic, Serbian traditional media do not employ editors who are qualified commentators. Independent analysts, those supported by political elite or scientists from social institutes comment on political events around the world. Their knowledge about world events is either too professional (a too large number of details narrows the picture, not the opposite) or subjective (clear pro-Russian or pro-West attitudes, or isolated political views as starting point for commenting world politics), he concluded.

## INTERNATIONAL NEWS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

When it comes to the international political scene and importance of the events, social media (Internet in general) have made a large number of Serbian citizens believe in the phrase “information is power” and put the level of trust in the media on its real position without becoming an easy target like several years ago. Citizens and political activists are very active on social media, primarily in commenting domestic news, i.e. criticizing or offering complete support to Government and its activities. There is few international news and foreign sources are used, but not so often. Radovic explained that regardless of the origin, the flow of information has become more and more important in the social media. Such trend is becoming more visible and “is threatening” to re-shape the entire information environment. Social and Internet media in Serbia are becoming more relevant, especially having in mind their natural two-way feature (direct and fast communication with audience). When it comes to world news, i.e. the news which is relevant on international scale, its credibility is largely supported by the fact that many Serbian speak English and know how to find authentic information and compare it with the information which has been placed in traditional media, said Staletovic.

Prof. Radovic said that local and international sources are increasing and naturally the inflow of foreign sources is much more important. On the other hand, Dejan Tasic stated that users of social media frequently share the link from domestic media and add their opinion about the news; he also added that we can often see the opinion of the profile owner’s through his status or link to his blog. The trend of connecting one’s views with specialized sources has become recognizable, and predicts that even though it cannot be relevant on this level, essential changes shall occur very soon, prof. Radovic believed.

Discussing trends, virtual pro et contra EU debate is not so prevailing, even though the positions and participants’ division are no longer so strong. The opinion of the majority of the audience about migration crisis depends on the reports obtained from EU countries, regardless of the fact that Serbia is itself on the migration path, prof. Radovic said, and added that several previous attitudes (from the first and second set of answers) may confirm or additionally argument this attitude and its truthfulness. Ivan Protic explained there were two clearly separated blocks, the so called patriotic block which is against EU and migrants, and a smaller civil block which believes in EU future and wishes to help migrants. One must say that part of pro-government media reports about migrants objectively, even with elements of sympathy. Their influence is hard to measure, but it is not negligible, he added.

Social media are becoming ground and channel for everything, claimed prof. Radovic and added that hate speech, as well as the total discourse of discrimination and intolerance have received a certain freedom in e-environment. However, it should not

be forgotten that it has received much more “filters”, i.e. catalysts. Domestic and foreign media posts on the Internet frequently disrespect the basic rules of journalism because their main goal is to get more likes and shares, not to show essence and send a message. They are often full of hate speech, nationalistic, anti-European and pro-Russian attitudes. Unlike Facebook, Twitter offers discussions with much more arguments and information which is somewhat more reliable. Ivan Protic partially agreed with this, and explains that social media are channels for discrimination, spreading prejudice and hate speech, especially when it comes to the “patriotic block”, as well as governing party activists who constantly accuse those who criticize the government and state that they are foreign agents, traitors and enemies of the state and nation. Staletovic had a positive attitude towards social media, and said that Twitter has contributed to spreading freedom of speech and reducing the degree of falling into the trap of propaganda, especially after several hundred world leaders, politicians, journalists have started using them. By following authentic information from the source and comparing comments and contextual reporting of Serbian media, a part of the audience becomes resistant to spinning and creating public opinion in accordance with the interests of media owners.

When it comes to world news, social media have become the major source of information, especially for young people. Social networks are open to all topics, which is much more than we can say about traditional media. However, Dejan Tasic warned there is much inaccurate and unchecked information. Unlike traditional media, social media do not stick to professional journalism standards. They stick to standards even less than tabloids where journalistic standards are visible only in traces. It should be mentioned that printed tabloids cover 70 percent of this market, as well as that no national TV frequency, which resists to government pressure, has become stronger and stronger, said Ivan Protic. Staletovic added that social networks and Internet media have brought novelty of innovation and enhanced debates in Serbia (in the past several years), but they still cannot win over the way traditional media follow such information. Essentially, in terms of world news, the majority of Serbian citizens believes traditional media much more than Internet search or forums. “The reason for that is that the habit of mistrust and critique (in terms of analysis) is still a new discipline in Serbia”, he thinks. Discussing this, prof. Radovic said that another problem in Serbian media is that those who have the largest resources are slowly becoming most influential. It is just a matter of time until they recognize the information capacities, as well as the possibility to influence, he says.

Considering how social media is different from traditional media, the targeted public in new information space is much more diverse, the population structure is more complex and the diverging points of view are recognizable. Aside from numerous quantitative and qualitative differences among these types of media, the scientific theory of media identifies another outmost important element - the age of the users of these two types of media. The difference between “older” and “younger” audience has never been as big as it is now. According to the laws of nature, social media users will be adults in a few years, while users of traditional media will soon retire. If his prediction turns out to be true, all other differences will be less significant. Srdjan Staletovic mentioned the age of the users as relevant, saying that younger generations and educated population often compares information from domestic media with worldwide media or even more with attitudes and information sent officially by the organizations which are in the focus of attention.

There is a critical mass in Serbia which is hard to delude and which checks and upgrades the basic level of information offered via traditional media by knowledge based on texts and other media content which derives from worldwide media. The possibility of commenting and discussing below texts/publications on social media, especially the possibility of commenting on official mainstream media texts offers the opportunity to debate and check information, which a part of Serbian audience uses.

## **FAKE NEWS AND PROPAGANDA**

According to Branko Cecen, director at Center for Investigative Journalism in Serbia, foreign propaganda has been present in Serbia for decades without a pause. At the moment, Russian propaganda is very active, countered by weaker and less crude attempts by the USA. However, all this is minuscule compared to the domestic propaganda, warned Cecen, explaining that the party in power had subdued and put under its control all media with significant reach and influence, relentlessly brainwashing the citizens. As a consequence, according to the interest of the Serbian government, whatever foreign factor is favored by the political option in power at a particular moment in time, it will receive large space for uncritical coverage in Serbian media. At this time, it is mostly Russia. Ivan Protic also thought that foreign propaganda is a bugbear that tabloids and pro-government media use to frighten citizens. Staletovic agreed with Cecen and Protic, and also said that propaganda is a problem in Serbia. There are minimum three schools, the first one believes that strong “West or pro-West propaganda” is present in Serbia, the second one heats up “pro-Russian” propaganda, while the third one, who often uses false data, emphasizes “paid Soros or

political propaganda which has a clear goal”, he explained.

As for “Soros propaganda”, Cecen said that there were no attempts to influence the editorial policy of his media from that side. Quite to the contrary, he said they were free to do whatever they saw fit exactly because they had received grants for investigative reporting. Advertisement market is the first thing any political party in Serbia takes over as soon as it is in power, and uses to control commercial media by allocating the revenue according to the interests of the government, explained Cecen. He also added that he was not aware of any kind of “propaganda” of that sort, and it puzzled him to understand that “Soros propaganda” became an accepted phrase, like something that undoubtedly exists.

It is obvious that some local political players are sided with big powers and whatever channel they control, will be used in political propaganda. They all crave for TV networks with national coverage, since the nation is illiterate (50% of the population is functionally illiterate) and not interested in world news, said Cecen, and added that networks sell their time for favors by powerful figures, or just to stay on good terms with them and not aggravate them. Of course, there are media with direct connections or even open ownership connections to Russia, USA or some European and Arab countries, he added and explained that those often report in an obviously biased way, but their reach, as well as influence, is comparatively small. However, their content is sometimes used by other media, in accordance with the interest of whoever controls them.

There is no much discussion about fighting propaganda and definitely not in mass media, unless the government does not start a paranoia-campaign about a foreign conspiracy to overthrow them. At such times, a relentless and deliberately untruthful smear campaign against independent, especially investigative journalists starts. It can become quite unbelievable at times, with accusations of journalists being “sodomasochists”, “spies” or “criminals”, always without a shred of evidence or any ethics of professional standards in a way of a good smear, stated Branko Cecen. At that point, journalists are accused of being “foreign mercenaries”, which is “proven” by the fact that their organizations win grants at calls for project proposals by EU and other donors. Cecen also added that it is never discussed if the published facts are correct, complete or important for the life of citizens of Serbia, because they most often are, unlike the smear campaign dirt thrown at them. A very small circle of citizens are interested in the real question of improper influence on media by foreign factors outside the government propaganda. Media literacy is quite undeveloped, so most citizens of Serbia are mere unconscious consumers of propaganda, Cecen agreed with Radovic. Attempts of serious discussion are almost always smothered by government controlled media, usually by loud distraction (a high profile murder case, strong official rhetoric towards one or the other neighbor country, stellar success of the government, act.). In this atmosphere of paranoia and constant state of alert, the Serbian citizens have lost all interest in foreign events, unless some very bizarre, bloody or in another way “tabloid” event has occurred somewhere in the world, Cecen concluded.

The story of propaganda jeopardizes the freedom of speech and economic survival of the media as the authorities control everything - from the economic position of the media to determining forbidden topics which mainly refer to domestic politics. The problem of false news is present as such news is mainly produced by tabloid media. The effects of such operation are hard to annul because the tabloid media prevails and such behavior is normal for them.

There are several initiatives that show the public the measurement of truthfulness of published information. Unfortunately, their authors form smaller groups of civil society organizations and their results are not sufficiently visible/present for the public. This refers to Isitnomer and several professional organizations such as KRIK<sup>8</sup> and BIRN<sup>9</sup>, but the governing elite and their media have satanized them and deprived them from the possibility of publishing the results of their research. Branko Cecen, CINS’ director, agreed and stated that only civil sector organizations do it on regular basis, on their own online media, sometimes republished by cable news TV with a very modest reach. Apart from that, he added, almost an entire media scene is a distorted, dysfunctional front which pretends to be news media.

Serbian public space constantly heats up (spin) stories that interest groups control the media, while money (usually from the West) controls interest groups. This type of public spin is not so new, unusual or specific for Serbia only, he added. It is very important as there is insufficient media freedom, transparency of ownership and editorial policy in Serbia. Thus, such approach (that the governing elite supports) results in the decrease of trust in the media, general repletion with media content and treating the media as extended arms of those who have power. When given a chance to state its opinion, the public in Serbia believes

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8 <https://www.krik.rs/en/>

9 <http://birn.eu.com/en/network/birn-serbia-home>

that it is possible to buy any type of information with EUR 100, i.e. that there is a “semi-legal way” (if such thing exists) to buy or order publicity, added Staletovic. Some internal researches of international organizations, such as research within the project Partnership for Media Development in SE Europe<sup>10</sup>, unfortunately show that the level of journalist economic security is very low and that the lack of clear understanding of the real owner of the media really enables rich people to buy publicity, order a scandal, even a scandal with international consequences. However, the Serbian public is not primarily concerned with the state of media. With the help of elite that heat up one of the three schools that elaborate on the existence and strengthening of propaganda in Serbia, the public believes that Soros propaganda machinery is becoming stronger in Serbia, and that the aim of Soros propaganda is to weaken the current government and make way for future puppet government.

“Most precise assessment of current state of facts and their professional placement in the media could be described as cacophony”, stated Staletovic. Large number of information and denials, statements which annul each other while actually blurring reality, show interest, people and groups the way they are not. In such circumstances, due to intensive behavior of majority of traditional media in Serbia, the public in Serbia cannot differentiate between propaganda and the truth.

Professor Radovic said that the phenomenon of propaganda is more than present in the Serbian public space. He declared that foreign propaganda, as any other type of propaganda, represents a combination of three components: interest, amount of invested assets, and functional, especially media (il)lteracy. So far, these three variables have had a large degree of influence, and thus fear from the stated appearance. Having in mind that the expression “foreign propaganda” is always related to non-domiciled population, its origin is completely irrelevant, he said. Therefore, the debate on possible levels of protection, as a completely legitimate category, directly depends on the transfer of scientific knowledge in the media field. But it barely exists. On the other hand, each type of protection implies control, which does not completely exclude the possibility of conditional specific freedom limitation. Red herrings are often present in these types of debates. For example, if the control of information space is a priori harmful, then forbidding hate speech, nominally speaking, is jeopardizing the freedom of speech, which cannot be an acceptable thesis, explained Radovic. The items which are harmful, and hate speech is definitely harmful, are to be controlled. This is exactly the thing that returns the debate to the beginning, i.e. to three key components: interest, amount of invested assets and media literacy, that is, the ability of critical thinking of those who are in the focus of manipulation.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the rich arguments and expert opinions of our interviewees, one can conclude a couple of things.

Firstly, media in Serbia are dependent on political elite and centers of power, which control editorial policies of most of Serbian media. Also, the financial aspect affects the position of the journalistic profession. This further implies the production of “copy-past” news, a lot of agency news without context, but at the same time the lack of investigative approach too.

On the other hand, social networks have positive and negative sides. In one way, the Internet accelerates citizens’ journalism and the democratization of media, but at the same time it is a space for propaganda and hate speech.

Attempts at regulating and monitoring may turn out to be poisonous gifts, as they may open the door to unnecessary limitations to freedom of speech and abusive usage of control leverage to silence critical voices.

All that shows that the only systematic solution in combating censorship and other types of media control, is continuous media education: educating the public in the spirit and values of good journalism, exercising critical thinking, inviting them to practice responsible use of powerful media tools that they have so easily at hand.

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10 <http://mirc.rs/en/uslovi-zaposljava-novinar-a-albaniji-bih-bjrm-crnoj-gori-i-srbiji/>

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**The current report is part of a series of similar works produced from November 2016 to January 2017.**

**The authors of the country reports are:**

Ilda Londo – Albania

Radenko Udovičić – Bosnia-Herzegovina

Sanja Vasic - Macedonia

Milena Perovic Korac - Montenegro

Mladen Velojic - Serbia

**On behalf of the Center for Independent Journalism in Bucharest, we would like to thank the following partners for their support and cooperation:**

Albanian Media Institute (Albania), Mediacenter for Media and Civil Society Development - BiH (Kožul), Media Initiatives – Association for Media Development and Promotion of Professional Journalism (BiH), Macedonian Institute for Media (Macedonia), Montenegro Media Institute (Montenegro), Media Center (Serbia), Media and Reform Centre Nis (Serbia), Media Development Center (Bulgaria).

# Lost in transition, stucked between East and West

