

The Feasibility of a Public Service Orientation in the Western Balkans

Complications for a 'Networked Society' in an Illiberal Context

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Abstract

Public media organisations in the Western Balkans are undergoing a complex transition from a history of state controlled media to become independent public service media. Despite considerable effort and expense, it has not gone as hoped in most cases. This chapter analyses contextual factors that are common to the seven countries of this region that affect developing a genuine public service orientation in media policies and performance. By better understanding historical legacies, inadequate technological development and late entry into digitalisation, and problems rooted in economic underdevelopment and clientelism, the prognosis for the emergence of 'networked societies' under illiberal conditions is at least tardy and perhaps impractical in the foreseeable future, at least. Contextual factors prioritise a set of values that greatly complicate the development of public service broadcasting in technological and democratic terms, much less the even more complex transition to public service media.

Keywords: public service broadcasting, public service media, digitalisation, democratisation, media capture, state broadcasting, clientelism

Introduction

The European Union clarified its political interest in the Western Balkan (WB) region in the 2003 Thessaloniki Declaration. The EU confirmed their view of the region as a "European perspective" and promised full membership for these countries after they have accomplished stipulated criteria, which include transforming state broadcasting institutions into public service broadcasting (PSB). This transformation is considered crucial for democratisation. In efforts to fulfil the requirement, WB countries have pursued models and standards for PSB as practiced in Western Europe. Regrettably, these efforts have produced disappointing results.

The point of departure for this chapter hinges on the 'network paradigm' theme that grounds the book, a paradigm that is generally considered to be of great importance for an emerging media-society context in which public service media (PSM) should operate. This chapter analyses the degree to which that paradigm is realistic or even

relevant in the WB region, and discusses characteristic challenges generated by the paradigm in the light of three key contextual features:

1. Legacy media systems and critical junctures that describe WB regional history, which established values and an overall cultural orientation that continues to shape these societies and their media systems.
2. The difficulty of realistically pursuing the development of a networked society construction due to underdevelopment in technological infrastructure.
3. Complications that compound this pursuit that are caused by economic disadvantages which limit investment capital and expose legacy media institutions to clientelistic arrangements and political colonisation – especially, but not exclusively, in the public sector.

Taken together, these features account for ‘illiberal democracies’ that hinder participatory democracy and constrain the potential for a public service orientation in media. As result, ‘public’ broadcasters in WB countries cannot embrace the new media logic and co-related values that are keyed to digitalisation in programme production and distribution, effective use of online platforms for citizen interaction, and creativity that pursues innovation in every aspect of service and operations. Moreover, most broadcast programmes from ‘public’ broadcasters in the region are not widely trusted or popular, and as a whole their channels have lost audiences. Public sector broadcasting is (rightly) perceived by most people in this region as an instrument of partisan politics wielded by elites, and generally regarded as technological laggards when compared with commercial actors (Marko 2016). The situation we are describing begs an essential question that threads its way through all discussion and debate about PSB in the WB region: Why do these media exist, and what is their actual purpose?

In this chapter, analysis is based on everyday practice in the region to demonstrate why and how the network society paradigm is incompatible with illiberal democracies. I base the analysis on the concept of ‘competitive authoritarianism’ to clarify the context. This concept has three important dimensions that all apply to countries in the WB region. First, democratic institutions exist but rules are not enforced. Second, election outcomes are taken seriously by incumbents and political opponents alike, but manipulation is routine and expected (Levitsky & Way 2010). Third, institutional resources and mechanisms for citizens are weak and subordinate to the interests of a ruling elite (Vladisavljević 2016). The condition of competitive authoritarianism accounts for atavistic tendencies in which public institutions of all types, especially media, are captured by political elites for their own self-interested purposes.

This chapter contributes to the book theme in two ways. First, I interrogate the realities and potential utility of the networked society notion in the context of the Western Balkan region – a region not often considered in earlier RIPE Readers. Second, I consider the complexity of challenges involved with developing a public service orientation per se in societies with histories and conditions that greatly complicate

democratic development – a set of realities that describe a large part of the world today. My approach departs from the more typical orientation that favours highly normative expectations and is often focused on the preservation of heritage broadcasting systems. In this region, there is no heritage of that sort to protect.

Three contextual factors that limit a public service orientation

As noted, three contextual factors inhibit developing a public service orientation in the WB region as a whole: 1) history and path dependencies, 2) technological underdevelopment, and 3) relative poverty that facilitates clientelistic ties between politics, business and media. I treat each factor in turn.

History and path dependency

Seven countries comprise the Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. All seven were socialist countries under Communist Party rule until 1991. Except for Albania, they were member states that comprised the former Yugoslavia.

After independence, each country began efforts to build liberal democracies. Ekiert (1999) believes the legacy of socialism and the wars that followed independence explain failures to achieve this. Peruško (2013, 2016) believes historic traits and formative events are crucial for analysis of media system development in this region and account for failures to realise a public service orientation in media policies. Her historical institutionalist approach complements the more typical normative approach to analyses of media systems that too often neglect historically-rooted distinctions. Her approach hinges on two key concepts: 1) critical juncture and path dependency for analysing longitudinal developments, and 2) formative events that affect continuity or discontinuity for institutional development. Peruško (2016) highlights three critical historic junctures in the WB region: 1) modernisation in the nineteenth century, 2) socialist rule after World War II, and 3) the post-socialist democratic transition. These are the formative periods that shaped the situation today.

Modernisation in this region started in the nineteenth century, and thus came later than elsewhere in Europe. Croatia and Slovenia (combined at the time) were the most developed. Croatia was the richest and the first newspapers were published there. Slovenia had the largest industrial production capacity (followed by Croatia) and the highest literacy rates. Only 9 per cent of the population was illiterate, while the figure for Macedonia was 84 per cent, the populations in today's Bosnia and Herzegovina were 80 per cent illiterate, Montenegro was at 67 per cent, Serbia at 64 per cent, and Croatia at 32 per cent (Peruško 2016). The better situation for Croatia and Slovenia hinges on a significant cultural divide between these states as part of the Austro-Hungarian empire while the rest were part of Ottoman Empire.

The second critical juncture is the experience of Yugoslavian socialism from 1945 until the 1991. Compared with Albania under Hoxha and Romania under Ceaușescu, Yugoslavia enjoyed a 'lighter touch' as a member of the non-aligned movement, and was always considered 'a maverick state' that was not strictly in the West or the East (Ramet 1995). Self-management was characteristic of Yugoslavian socialism, which allowed workers to participate in decision-making (although they were excluded from decisions of fundamental importance – for example, appointing Directors was the exclusive purview of the Communist Party). Of course, co-governing and consulting in decisions about firm operations is not the same as participation in societal governance (Lydall 1989), although there was a belief that proved to be naïve that self-management at the firm level would encourage decentralisation of decision making at the societal level (Woodward 1995). Nevertheless, Peruško (2016) sees the socialist period as an integrative influence on political and economic conditions for media development in the former Yugoslavian republics that account for their relatively higher technological sophistication and more critical orientation than other countries in eastern Europe in this era. Despite this, disparities between the most developed Yugoslav republics (Croatia and Slovenia) and the rest continually increased and there was considerable poverty.

The third juncture followed the collapse of Yugoslavia when the focus shifted to democratisation efforts and becoming EU member states. With the exception of Slovenia, however, this period was damaged by the worst conflicts since World War II (Croatia 1990 – 1995; Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992 – 1995; Serbia and Kosovo 1999, and Macedonia 2001). In this conflict-ridden situation, state-controlled media continued to be an important instrument for propaganda, which severely damaged trust in these institutions and have since been an important obstacle to their transformation into PSM.

I provide two examples. Radio-Television Serbia (RTS) was tightly controlled by the government of Slobodan Milošević (Veljanovski 2005). After his fall, RTS embarked on a PSM transformation project, but had a badly wounded reputation that have so far prevented much success. In Croatia, the Democratic Union controlled HRT by various means during the war, imposing stifling regulations and installing politically-appointed managers and editors, as well as exerting control over content and mandating instructions for how journalists should report from the battlefield (Thompson 1995; Kurspahić 2003). None of the private TV stations had a significant share of the audience, which left HRT a *de facto* monopoly. It was only after political changes in Serbia and Croatia in 2000 that any real possibility for reforming state-controlled media became realistic. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the war legacy was institutionalised in an organisational structure for public broadcasting that reflects territorial and political divisions. As result, BHRT is weakened by huge financial debt and lacks political support. The legitimacy of two entities, Federal RTV for the Muslim-Croats and RTRS for the Serbs, depend directly on their political affiliations. Thus, regional history and engrained path dependencies are significant factors constraining the development of a public service orientation.

Technological underdevelopment

The second contextual factor points to the need for a digital technological infrastructure that is a prerequisite for building a networked society. In the WB region, this is underdeveloped. Although investment during the socialist period created a reasonably good technological basis, the infrastructure was devastated by war and later development was stymied. Broadcasting in Yugoslavia was decentralised with an umbrella organisation, the Yugoslav Radio-Television (YRT) co-ordinating programme exchanges between broadcasters in the member republics. Each enjoyed considerable autonomy in programming and production, in selecting staff and collecting funding. Croatia had the best technical infrastructure. HRT's headquarter building was constructed in 1986 and served as the EBU exchange centre for Yugoslavia. In the socialist period, the Serbian broadcaster, RTS, had a respected reputation for providing good informative and documentary programmes. Certainly, the Communist Party influenced how information was selected in all these countries, and imposed a degree of control on media, but an important positive legacy was the license fee model for financing, which was only maintained after independence by Croatia.

War damage and the poverty that followed crippled incentives for new media development. Most WB broadcasters still have little capacity to expand their offerings and no domestic technology companies are leaders in setting industry standards. There has been little demand from mobile operators to secure spectrum space (Broughton Micova, forthcoming). The main drivers for digitalisation and technical improvement are still external deadlines set by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the EU, and problems with signal interference from neighbouring states (Milosavljevič & Broughton Micova 2013). Only Croatia and Slovenia completed the transition to digital broadcasting before the deadline for EU member states in 2012, while the ITU deadline of June 2015 is still unmet by BiH and Kosovo. These countries were especially ravaged by war and were not completely self-governing for years afterwards. Both still suffer from fragile state-building processes and view switchover to digital terrestrial television (DTT) with a scepticism that is reinforced by the complicated experiences in neighbouring countries (Ahmetašević & Hadžiristić 2017; Miftari 2017).

Switchover depends on support from the state or the EU. In Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro, the aid recipient was a public network operator that was set up from a divestiture of the former links and transmissions department of state broadcasting organisations that were supposed to become PSB. There are no direct subsidies for infrastructure in Croatia, but the DTT network operator is also a public company. Public network operators facilitate efforts to fulfil universal coverage obligations, including the need to reach about 15 per cent of the Croat population that lives in mountainous areas. Public network operators serve a genuine public interest need in providing access to digital signals where the commercial value of DTT is low. In Serbia and Macedonia, many local and regional broadcasters believe it is not worth paying the

Table 1. Overview of switchover process in the countries completing before the ITU 2015 deadline

	Aid to PSB	Aid for infrastructure	Campaign	Consumer subsidy
Croatia	Tender waived for MUX access	None	Yes	20-50 % cost of STB
Serbia	Dedicated space on MUX1	Yes, inc. EU IPA funds	Yes, inc. with EU IPA funds	Yes, for vulnerable
Macedonia	1 MUX dedicated	Yes, state budget covered PSB MUX	Yes	Yes, for vulnerable and obligations on private MUX
Montenegro	Dedicated space on MUX1	Yes, inc. EU IPA funds	Yes	Yes, for vulnerable

Source: Broughton Micova (forthcoming)

fees for free-to-air DTT transmission (Milosavljević & Broughton Micova 2013). Given low dependence on DTT and weak media markets in the region, one should expect only declining interest from commercial players. Nevertheless, “the public interest in maintaining a publicly owned DTT network might warrant continued operation as a form of public service media provision” (Broughton Micova forthcoming).

Economic disadvantages and clientelism

The third contextual factor is the biggest obstacle for building networked societies in WB countries: clientelism. The transition to liberal democracy was gravely wounded by wars that have taken a heavy toll on infrastructure and human life. Instead of being a trustworthy arbiter in local affairs, the state in this region has become a resource for political parties and oligarchs (Zielonka & Mancini 2011). This accounts for widespread clientelism, which is a form of societal structure where “access to social resources is controlled by patrons, and community resources are allocated to clients, in exchange for various types of support” (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos 2002: 11). Compared with EU averages, WB countries are at the bottom across indicators of economic development (Table 2). Kosovo has the lowest GDP rate among all European countries, with high unemployment and net salaries that are four to five times lower than the EU average.

Economic development is aggravated by small market sizes and far less overall revenue availability and potential in WB media markets. The best off is Croatia, but only in comparative terms.

Public broadcasters throughout the region are affected by poor economic conditions in two ways. First, they must partly rely on advertising money and commercial incomes that are also regulated by EU rules on state aid. Second, poverty discourages a large proportion of citizens from paying the license fee or taxes needed to fund PSB. As a result, they pursue alternative funding which tends to be commercial and contradicts what many consider an essential normative principle of PSB. In practice, public broadcasters are thereby exposed to political and corporate pressures resulting from heavy reliance on advertising, which strengthens ties with governing parties, state

Table 2. Indicators of economic development in the Western Balkan countries

	Population size in million (2015)	GDP/per capita in \$ (2016)	Unemployment rate (2016)	Average salary net in EUR (2017)	Media market size in mil \$ (2016, 2017)
Albania	2.9	4.1	17	330	45.8
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.8	4.7	43	440	52.3
Croatia	4.2	12.1	17	813	315
Kosovo	1.8	3.7	30	330	N/A
Macedonia	2.1	5.2	27	372	36.2
Montenegro	0.6	6.7	14	512	12
Serbia	7.1	5.3	19	404	193
EU	510	25.6	8	1.520	N/A

Sources: World Bank (2016, 2017); www.tradingeconomics.com; multiple sources; IREX Media Sustainability Index (2016, 2017).

advertisers and other media operators. For example, in Serbia most media, including RTS, sell advertising through marketing agencies and key personnel in these agencies are closely tied to the former and the incumbent Presidents of Serbia and their political parties (Marko 2017a). Significant indirect political influence is the result, which was further aggravated by direct state funding for PSB from 2014 to 2016 for RTS. The same pertains to Kosovo and Montenegro.

The situation is similar to what we have seen in Hungary and Poland in recent years, where the “anti-system proto-hegemonic parties have in recent years taken offices” (Bajomi-Lazar, forthcoming). This is evident in the government of Vučić in Serbia, ethno-political parties in a coalition in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Đukanović who has ruled Montenegro for 27 years. Following electoral victory in 2015, the conservative Croatian Democratic Union government dismissed the entire management and editorial board of HRT and installed “ideologically suitable” personalities. Decreased quality and a plunging level of trust have resulted (Marko 2017a). These examples indicate a deviated role for PSB: instead of being a tool for conflict management, they become a mirror for and enhancement of political and ideological conflict. The situation is generalisable for all seven countries of the WB region.

As data from the IREX Media Sustainability Index indicate (Figure 1), the ‘golden age’ of media development was between 2001 to 2005 and coincided with political stability, steady economic growth and ‘EUphoria. The situation today is in sharp retrograde as political and business actors have colonised all public and state resources which decreasing media freedom, degrading professionalism, and stagnation rather than innovation. The collapse has been especially pronounced since 2008 due to the global financial crisis that has fuelled political instability. This decline has regional implications and ramifications for the EU; we are not discussing a problem confined to WB countries.

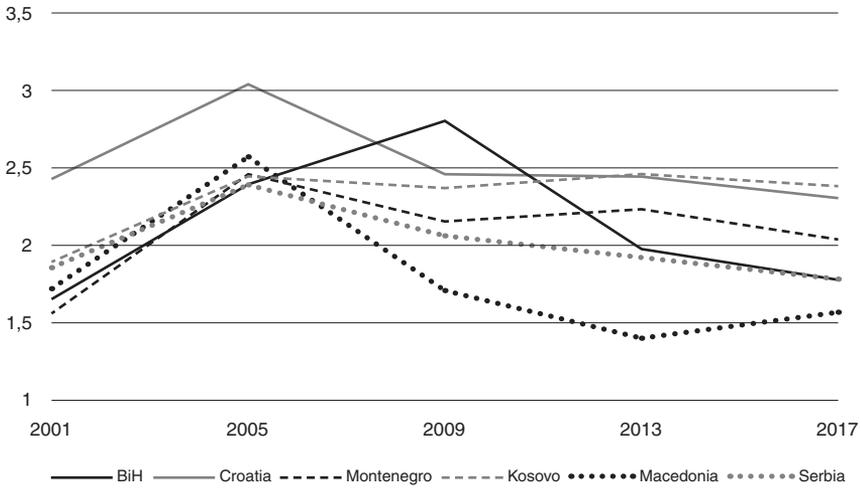


Figure 1. Comparative insight on the state of development of media sector in the Western Balkan countries

Sources: IREX Media Sustainability Index (2001 – 2017); www.policyhub.net

PSB institutions are in the vanguard of general efforts to colonise public resources. The omnipresence of political party influences, explained by the weakness of trade unions, professional bodies, and civil society organisations, has undermined independence in public service television especially. Parties select managers based on political rather than professional criteria. As a result, public media managers are not independent professionals but party servants. Institutional guarantees are specified on paper to safeguard editorial independence and political impartiality, but have no basis in reality. Political parties play the leading role in formulating regulations, as well, and very often informal rules override formal laws. Public resources, especially for programming and from advertising, are channelled to party clients via public service television money in exchange for various services rendered to the parties (Bajomi Lazar forthcoming).

The failure of imitative transformation

Attempts to transition former state broadcasters to PSB have been described by Slavko Splichal (2001) as “imitative transformation”. Research shows how unrealistic it has been to think a successful model elsewhere could be transplanted into a different context and flourish in the absence of enabling contextual factors (Berkowitz et al. 2003; Kumar 2006; Irion & Jusić 2014). The project was premised on a normative approach that expects these countries to adhere to Western European standards and principles for PSB policy. Local contexts and distinctive characteristics have been largely

neglected. Moreover, all these countries were approached uniformly (Jakubowicz & Sükösd 2008; Voltmer 2013). The EU and international media development agencies exerted pressure through the mechanism of ‘conditionality’, whereby candidate countries must show steady progress in fulfilling a set of normative criteria to be eventually awarded EU state membership. WB countries have pursued this when in their favour, but performed differently as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Public broadcasters in the Western Balkan countries – an overview

Country	Broadcaster	Established (by law)	Main source of funding	Annual budget (mil EUR)	Popularity of programs
Albania	RTSH	1998	License fee	16.4	Low
	BHRT (national)	2002	License fee	12	Low
Bosnia and Herzegovina	FRTV (entity)	2002	Marketing	No data for license fee 6 (marketing)	High
	RTRS (entity)	2002	Licensee fee + government subsidies	6-7	Medium
Croatia	HRT	1990	License fee	186.47	Medium
Kosovo	RTK	1999	Budget	8 – 12	Medium
Macedonia	MRT	1997	Tax	21.5	Low
Montenegro	RTCG	2002	Budget	16	Medium
Serbia	RTS (national)	2002	Tax	55.76	High
	RTV (province)	2002	Tax	n / a	Low

Source: www.analitika.ba.

In Serbia and Croatia, transformation started after 2000 when these countries reached a suitable degree of political maturity to break ties with authoritarian regimes (Marko 2017a). In Croatia, HRT was established on the legacy of the socialist era broadcaster with continuity in infrastructure and the funding model, and has been, perhaps surprisingly, the most successful in the region (Mezulić 2016; Marko 2017). In Serbia, authorities built PSB on a reform that was discontinuous with past experience because the broadcaster was so misused for propaganda during the war. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Kosovo, the transformation process has been completely driven by the international community (Ahmetašević & Hadžiristić 2017; Miftari 2017). Macedonia and Bosnia are peculiar because the structure of their broadcasters intentionally reflects ethnic cleavages and political divisions.

The chief problem overall is lack of an actual public service orientation (i.e. lack of those values as a priority in practice) and the continuing dominance of a heritage broadcasting paradigm (i.e., retarded development of digital networked media). Efforts to transform state broadcasters into public broadcasters were undertaken with little or no public debate and there is still a lack of consensus on founding principles and core values. Efforts to define core values have been quite modest, largely confined to

media experts and a few concerned professionals. In these societies, priority values are based on traditional, conservative views that focus on nation-building, ethnic self-awareness and religious exclusivity – each of which has more often led to conflict than consensus. Public media are seen as political instruments to serve these goals rather than civil society. Local actors have typically been unable to discuss the issues and possible solutions for crucial questions, such as the kinds of media needed, their roles in society, or how to establish a public orientation in media policies (Marko 2017c).

On a normative level, stakeholders included in decision-making tend to advocate principles of pluralism, diversity, press freedom, open access to information and competition – i.e., values premised on Western democratic ideals. But democracy is not a static entity and requires continual discussion, dialogue and exchange. In practice, these values haven't been widely discussed and are largely 'paper tigers'. In BiH and Kosovo, the PSB concept was imposed by the international community, and there is little clarity in any WB country about which values are essential and which are not.

As a result, current PSB operations in the region do not fulfil their stipulated remits or perform their mandated roles in being public institutions working for the public. They do not primarily serve the public interest, but are the object of strict political control and instrumentalisation. This calamity has become increasingly visible with the growth of networked communications that are characterised by online discourse and facilitated by sources that offer domestic public and commercial media and enjoy much higher credibility and reliability among citizens (Eurobarometer 2014, 2015).

Problems in three levels of public service broadcasting operation

The absence of public discussion and failure to achieve consensus is reflected in three levels of PSB operation in WB countries: structure, digitalisation and interaction with audiences.

Structure: A dominant traditional paradigm

Structural transformation reveals the absence of Western PSB normative values. Public broadcasters in the WB region are organised within traditional structures that are massive and rigid as a heritage of the socialist system. Most have too many hierarchical layers of management, an aspect that complicates decision-making, and too many employees, which raises costs (numbers range between 800-900 in Kosovo and Bosnia, to 3,800 in Serbia). These broadcasters face significant challenges rooted in path dependencies because they were created with the logic of mass production, silo organisations and budgets, and strict hierarchical divisions in decision making. The inherited values reflect the state media paradigm. This has begun to change, but only modestly. In Croatia, public broadcasters adopted an ambitious plan to adapt

internal structure to a new media logic and rationalise production costs. In Serbia, a few actors – mostly experts in media and law – advocate for a functional-institutional paradigm instead of the purely institutional framework that has dominated media policies (Marko 2017b). But the efforts are so far modest, and results remain to be seen.

Digitalisation: Production, distribution, sharing

The delay of digitalisation creates a dire context for PSM production, distribution and interaction with audiences. In this region, production is highly decentralised, loosely co-ordinated, and without integrated newsrooms. So far, only Croatia's HRT is strategically focused on internal restructuring to create integrated newsrooms. RTV in Serbia adopted HRT's strategy in principle, but hasn't been able to implement it due to a lack of resources. In all the WB countries, PSB compares badly with private TV outlets, such as N1 and Al Jazeera Balkans, that were established from scratch and use digital production technologies and professional managers and employees who produce diverse programmes of good quality that are distinctive in comparison with commercial offers.

Promotion of pluralism and diversity in the public sphere was a primary expectation for the transformation to PSB. The democratising role of media is supposed to facilitate discourse in civil society and providing a forum for communities and individuals to express and contest ideas, and benefit from the interaction. But public broadcasters in the region have generally failed to perform this role due to lack of public trust and diverse programmes. While some sources (e.g., IREX MSI) think establishing the dual system of public and private media that is characteristic of Western Europe will contribute to the plurality of sources, this mainly affects external pluralism rather than internal – meaning more diversity *between* than *within*, which is a problem for PSB as such. There is a growing tendency in the WB to favour incumbent political actors that serve the government's purpose mainly. The rare exception of high internal pluralism is the second channel of RTV in Serbia, which broadcasts programmes for national minorities in nine languages (Marko 2013; Marko 2017a). But everywhere PSB popularity has dramatically decreased in competition with the private sector. The main reasons for any continuing popularity is not related to content quality, distinctiveness or exclusivity, but rather the opposite – the growing commercialisation of PSB.

Online presence and reach, as well as distribution strategies, vary significantly across WB countries. Most PSB organisations are not strategically oriented to develop online services. Only Serbia's RTS and Croatia's HRT have developed web pages with noteworthy reach and popularity. Significant development is beginning in RTK Kosovo and RTRS in BiH. RTKlive.com is retaining online audiences, in particular the diaspora audience that account for more than 60 per cent of the users (Miftari 2017). But everywhere, web pages are generally designed to support news that is produced primarily for broadcast channels. The only specialised platform is operated by HRTi Croatia, and Macedonia's MRT Play. HRTi is fairly popular and works smoothly. It is

user friendly and offers all types of content, including culture, documentaries, programmes for youth adults and children, programmes on religion, music, and news.

People: From comrades, through citizens, towards consumers

To serve as a forum for all citizens, public media needs to be popular and reach as much of a total population as possible. They must be trusted in order to achieve that. PSB organisations in the WB are fairly popular as broadcast sources of information with significant viewership, ranging from 20-22 per cent (Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro), up to 29 per cent in Croatia. The umbrella broadcaster in BiH never developed wide public support due the nation’s divided nature (its rating in 2016 was around 5 per cent). The popularity of PSB in Macedonia and Albania is abysmal (Bino & Kadia 2017).

Table 4. Public service broadcasting vs. private television in Western Balkan countries (shares)

	PSB share (year)	Main commercial competitor share
Albania	No information	No information
Bosnia and Herzegovina	PSB total: 24 % (2016) FTV: 12 % RTRS: 7 % BHT: 5 %	OBN: 12 % Pink: 10 % Program plus: 9 % Hayat: 6 %
Croatia	HTV: 29 % (2015) – all 4 channels	Nova TV: 24 % (2015) RTL: 15 %
Kosovo	RTK: 22 % (2014)	KTV: 24 % (2014) RTV: 21-22 % (2014)
Macedonia	MTV 1: 7 % (2013) MTV 1 and 2: 6 % (2014)	Sitel: 29 % Kanal 5: 13 % Alsat M: 5 %
Montenegro	RTVCG1: 22 % (2013)	TV Pink: 27 % TV Vijesti: 20 % (2013)
Serbia	RTS: 20-22 % (2016)	TV Pink: 24 % Happy: 12-14 % (reality shows)

But even where popular, these organisations are not among the most trusted institutions. According to the Eurobarometer (2014, 2015), populations in these countries tend to demonstrate low levels of trust in media. In all these countries, citizens have more trust in the internet and social media sources than in broadcasting. The greatest decline in trust has been recorded in Montenegro and Serbia (Eurobarometer 2015).

Approaching citizens as active participants is entirely absent. Only a few organisations have any mechanism for interacting with their publics. In most cases, citizens rarely have opportunity to engage and there is scanty evidence they are willing anyway.¹

In several cases (Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia) various institutions, civil society groups and professional associations are entitled to nominate candidates to managing or consultative bodies, but the final decision on the nominees is made by political representatives in a process that is not transparent.

Out of ten broadcasters, only three (Croatia, Albania and Montenegro) have established an ‘ombudsman’ function. Croatia established such a body in 2011. In Albania, the aim of the Council for Viewers and Listeners is to hold RTSH accountable to the public and it presents an annual report to the Steering Council, AMA (Autoriteti Mediave Audiovizive), the Ministry for Media and the Parliamentary Commission for Education and Means of Public Communication (Bino & Kadia 2017). In Kosovo, although envisioned by law, such a body was never set up by the RTK Board. In Macedonia, this role has been played by MRT’s Programme Council. Except in Croatia, none of these bodies are efficient (Marko 2017b).

Lessons learned: Towards a functional paradigm

Taking into account both achievements and shortcomings in the difficult transition from state broadcasting towards public service media organisations, the ‘network society’ paradigm is not yet valid in WB societies. The region is stuck in broadcasting and rooted in an increasingly obsolete traditional mass media orientation that fails to cope with the rapidly changing media environment. These organisations are not considered the most reliable sources of information and they aren’t, in an apparent way, contributing to growth in democracy. There are several possible explanations:

- Achieving PSM is not on the agenda due to a political situation that is not conducive for the networked society paradigm to flourish. Societies that lean towards illiberal democracies with regimes that seek control of all public resources, especially the media, do not consider these potential developments as opportunities. On the contrary, they are generally hostile to the deliberative potential of networked communications.
- Moreover, the constitutive values of a genuine public service orientation haven’t been properly considered or discussed.
- In the domain of PSB reform, the approach has been strictly normative and neglects the contextual nature of change, thus failing to account for specific historic legacies and heritage systems.
- The normative approach looks good on paper but is an ‘empty shell’ in practice, incapable of fulfilling their remits (Jakubowicz 1995, 2004). Discussions about the roles of PSB in changing societies, which would encourage a shift to focusing on an institutional-functional paradigm, are neglected.

- Western Balkan countries, including their public broadcasters, too often lack either the necessary resources or knowledge (or both) to accomplish anything via digitalisation beyond traditional broadcasting.
- Public broadcasters here are detached from global trends and from their audiences, as evident in the decreasing popularity of programmes, general lack of trust, and only modest reach in what has been attempted online.

In the early 1990s, all of these broadcasting organisations inherited significant infrastructural resources and respected production cultures. Few have benefitted from either. Without a conducive culture, simply having institutions provides an insufficient basis for successful development. As observed by Darendorf (1990), it is important to build on the basis of a 'societal foundation' because that is essential for defending newly formed (or transformed) institutions. The WB region lacks a foundation for defending, much less advancing, PSB. Milton (2000) suggests that transforming institutions from a previous system, which is certainly the case with former state-controlled broadcasters, is much more complex and with more uncertain outcomes compared with establishing a new institution from scratch because inherited institutions were integral to a previous system that remains (in heavier or lighter degrees) with characteristics that are hard to 'erase'.

Moreover, lagging technological development and belated digitalisation in most WB countries means PSB has little impact or opportunity. This failure represents an existential threat to the future of PSM as such in this region. The transformation that has been achieved is largely confined to Croatia and Serbia. Croatia's government provided substantial support for building a transition network that will facilitate the distribution of digital signals, and HRT strategically embraced the opportunity to improve its production capacities. The process is still ongoing and considered by many to be too slow. In other WB countries, state support for building a transmission network for digital signals has been completely absent due to lack of funds and political obstruction, especially evident in BiH. Most states don't consider such a network to be a valuable resource, or care about guaranteeing an independent public company to provide equal opportunities for all.

Finally, economic instability and broken funding models explain why public institutions can be rather easily colonised and instrumentalised by political actors. This is a consequence of illiberal tendencies and the politicisation of the media landscape in general. Political elites control and use public media as an instrument of power in pursuing their own interests rather than to serve the public interest. Regulation and legal protection for media independence have been ineffective in the face of populist and increasingly authoritarian elites who adjust laws to minimise media as independent democratic actors (Marko 2016).

Conclusions

The inability of public sector broadcasters in the WB region to cope with challenges and embrace opportunities inherent to the network society paradigm is a significant problem given growth in online communication and digital communication technology. It is significant because this is co-related with changing habits and needs also among WB populations, especially the youth. These trends have not even been properly discussed in policies related to public broadcasters. In combination with the three determining contextual factors (socialist legacy, inadequate technical infrastructure, and economic disadvantages resulting in clientelism), for the most part WB public broadcasters are not trusted or distinctive and hardly contribute to democratic development.

Public broadcasters have generally failed to deeply enough consider their role and position as truly distinctive, or to pursue the excellence they could provide. This is an existential problem because most are quickly losing a race with commercial TV stations that are championing digital production and distribution. These companies started from scratch with purpose-built structures and are developing integrated newsrooms and collaborative cultures based on values that prize participation, production excellence, efficiency, and innovation. Compared with PSB, commercial media such as Al Jazeera Balkans or N1 are garnering more attention and generating much higher trust.

Developing public service media in the Western Balkans is especially important since trust in public institutions and media as a whole is eroding. These public broadcasters need to become respected facilitators in building the communications infrastructure needed for developing networked societies, both online and offline. For media policy, this implies the need to establish a firm public service orientation in the new media environment. As a precondition, the main actors, and not only political decision-makers, should discuss what constitutes the basis for such an orientation in this context, and the guiding values for this in practice. This should be undertaken as a series of domestic initiatives, not as another external push as has hitherto been the case.

Second, public service media providers should critically consider their role within Western Balkan societies. Their mere existence cannot be the penultimate purpose. Their validity as *public* media depends fundamentally on offering valuable and measurable contributions as decided by their host societies. This will require building a new management culture so that PSM can take a leadership role in developing media innovations in service-related operations, and adhere to the highest standards of ethical values in production and distribution. Secondly, public media must become the image and reality of a primary source for reliable information. Finally, these organisations need to experiment with audience interaction because their future depends on mastering this.

Notes

1. Two exceptions are Macedonia, where citizens protested (2016) for more freedoms and PSB was liberalised from political interference, and the Serbian province of Vojvodina, where dismissed journalists, civil activists and citizens organised an informal group (#PodzriRTV) to demonstrate against politically motivated removals in RTV.

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