

Three Decades Later: From Self-Managed to State-Captured Media in Serbia

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Introduction:

the legacy of the 'exceptional' case of communism

The legacy of the socialist period in Serbia is tied to the history of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). As one of the Yugoslav republics, Serbia was part of the specific institutional, economic and social set-up of the SFRY. According to Miroljub Radojković (2009: 90), Yugoslavia was an 'exceptional' case among the communist regimes due to the 'self-management model of its political and economic system' which empowered 'citizens to take part in the decision-making process' and cultivated a unique political culture. From another point of view, the political system of Yugoslavia was 'an authoritarian regime with limited societal pluralism, in which power was divided between the constituent republics and federal government' (Zakošek, 2008: 590).

These two key features, a self-management model and a federal state system, were reflected in the Yugoslav media system, which was 'positioned between the communist and liberal extremes' (Milutinović, 2017: 377) and was considered as very liberal and decentralised for a communist country (Radojković, 1994; Tunnard, 2003). Each republic had a somewhat independent media system, regulated by the laws of that republic, with media catering to the latter's audiences (Radojković, 1994; Mihelj, 2004; Volčič, 2006). In other words, the media were politically controlled, but not tightly from the federal level. Furthermore, the Yugoslav media scene was seen as culturally diverse (Thompson, 1999). Nevertheless, although almost each religion, minority, local community, or any other audience segment in Yugoslavia had its own publication, only few media had a wide influence. As Christopher R. Tunnard (2003: 103) points out, only five newspapers out of 2,825 published in 1987 in Yugoslavia 'had a circulation of more than 100,000, and four of these were located in Serbia'.

Along these lines, most of the history of the media system in Serbia can be characterised as powerful political/business elites controlling or capturing

influential media while simulating media pluralism. From the beginning of the communist regime in 1945, the newspaper landscape was dominated by two dailies – *Borba*, the mouthpiece of the ruling party, and *Politika*, which represented a wider group of socialist forces. Even during this phase, ‘the regime encouraged the diffusion of local print and electronic media financed and controlled by local authorities’ (Castaldo and Pinna, 2018: 269). Radio Television Belgrade (RTB) was a ‘State monopoly’ until the 1990s (Milivojević, 2005: 1328). Broadcasting in Serbia dates back to 1929, when Radio Belgrade – the predecessor of today’s public service broadcaster, Radio Television Serbia (RTS) – was established. Television Belgrade went on air in 1958, with a second TV channel launched in 1972 and a third in 1989. However, there were a number of local, Belgrade-based media outlets, such as the radio station Studio B, which started broadcasting in 1970 and offered more entertainment than Radio Belgrade.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia started with the fall of communism along with the slow-brewing nationalist conflicts in 1989–1990. New party systems were established in all Yugoslav republics after the first multiparty elections of 1990. The elections in Serbia brought to power Slobodan Milošević, the leader of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), whose regime shaped the pace and trajectory of the transformation of the country’s political and media systems. Namely, besides the communist legacy, Serbia’s democratisation pathway was burdened with a decade-long authoritarian regime marked by national wars, the 1999 NATO bombing, economic devastation, and international isolation. Therefore, most scholars assume that the process of Serbia’s democratic transition started after the fall of Milošević in October 2000.

Media market transformations: long privatisation and inefficient regulatory bodies

KEY FACTS AND EVENTS:

- 1991: Law on Public Information and Law on Radio Television, introducing private ownership of media, adopted.
- 2002: Newly adopted Law on Broadcasting provides for establishment of regulatory agency and privatisation of state-owned media; law subsequently amended numerous times.

- 2003: Republic Broadcasting Agency (RBA) established.
- 2007: Deadlines for completing media privatisation missed.
- 2014: New set of laws – Law on Public Information and Media, Law on Public Service Media, and Law on Electronic Media – significantly rewrites media legislation.
- 2015: Privatisation of state-owned media finally completed.

During the Milošević regime, the media system was transformed from self-management into a state-market model (Milutinović, 2017). The framework for this transformation was set primarily by two laws passed in 1991, the Law on Public Information (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 19, 29 March 1991) and the Law on Radio Television (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 48, 5 August 1991). These laws introduced private ownership in the media sector and provided for the development of the advertising market, but at the same time allowed the government to seize ownership or control of the most influential media and to capture the media market. The leading newspapers, *Politika* and *Večernje Novosti*, as well as the main news agency Tanjug, were turned from self-managing into state organisations (Castaldo and Pinna, 2018: 269; Milutinović, 2017: 368). The authority over RTS was ‘transferred to the Government, including powers to appoint the Steering Board, Supervisory Board and Director-General’ (Milutinović, 2017: 368).

On the other hand, private independent media (mostly radio and television stations) flourished – at the end of the 1990s, the total number of media outlets in Serbia was over 1,000 (Castaldo and Pinna, 2018: 269). The exponential growth of private media outlets could not be supported by the advertising market, which was underdeveloped and manipulated by state interventions. The state budget was the main source of funding for most of the national media, while the major advertisers were companies whose owners were in clientelistic relations with Milošević and other state officials. Furthermore, the procedures for allocating licences and frequencies for radio and television broadcasting were neither properly established nor strictly followed. Altogether this created so-called ‘chaos in the ether’ (Veljanovski and Stavljanin, 2017: 57). Newspapers could be printed by three publishing houses, of which only one (Forum in Novi Sad) was not under direct or indirect government control, while distribution was controlled by the two pro-government companies (Tunnard, 2003: 104). Therefore, private independent media in Serbia could survive only with the help of international media assistance

programmes, which played a significant role in the Serbian media system throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as Davor Marko (2013) shows. According to Marko (*ibid.*: 10), international media assistance was far-reaching, including ‘the adoption of an adequate legal framework, the establishment of regulatory bodies and practices, the transformation of the state TV into a public service broadcaster, and the empowerment of journalists and media managers to cope within the market conditions’.

With international assistance, democratisation of the Serbian media sector was initiated immediately after 2000 with the drafting of several structural laws, such as the Law on Public Information, the Law on Telecommunications, and the Law on Broadcasting. However, the adaptation and implementation of the media laws was complex and slow (Milutinović, 2017; Veljanovski and Stavljanin, 2017). According to those laws, the deadline for privatisation of state-owned print and broadcast media was 2005 and 2006 respectively (subsequently postponed until the end of 2007). However, those deadlines were not met. An overview by Boban Tomić (2007: 66–72) shows that by 2007 only 57 media outlets had been privatised, while 52 were in the process of privatisation and 120 were still state-owned, mostly by local authorities. Furthermore, the Law on National Councils of National Minorities, adopted in 2009, allowed the government to avoid privatisation by transferring control of state-owned media outlets to minority councils. By 2011 there were still 73 media outlets to be privatised.

One of the aims of the Law on Broadcasting, adopted in 2002, was to establish a national regulatory authority for broadcast media. Thus, the Republic Broadcasting Agency (RBA) was set up in 2003. However, the RBA Council was structured in a way that enabled the government to exert influence over the nomination and election of six out of its nine members as well as over the Council’s decisions (Veljanovski and Stavljanin, 2017). According to Castaldo and Pinna (2018: 272), ‘amendments adopted between August 2004 and October 2006 further enhanced government influence over the Republic Broadcasting Agency (RBA) while strengthening its discretionary powers in distributing licences’. For example, an amendment adopted in 2006 conferred the authority for approving the RBA’s financial plan on the government instead of Parliament (Matić, 2012: 48). The first procedure of issuing broadcasting licences, conducted between 2006 and 2008, was criticised for disregarding quality and diversity criteria (Jakubowicz, 2006), and lack of transparency and clear rules (Matić, 2012: 48). Four years later, in 2012, the perceptions of radio and TV editors regarding the procedure of issuing broadcasting licences in 2006/2008 showed that the RBA’s ‘decisions were the result of political and economic influences’ (Matić, 2012: 47).

A new set of laws passed in 2014 – Law on Public Information and Media, Law on Public Service Media, and Law on Electronic Media – significantly rewrote Serbian media legislation. Under those laws, media privatisation was finally completed in December 2015. However, the state still holds almost half of the shares in the two oldest national dailies, *Politika* and *Večernje Novosti*. Also, the status of the once most influential news agency, Tanjug, is unclear. The agency is still operating despite the state decision to close it, after an unsuccessful attempt at privatisation in 2015. Furthermore, according to Castaldo and Pinna (2018: 275), ‘many of the privatized public media went to entrepreneurs close to the SNS [Serbian Progressive Party], which were able to recoup the costs through grants provided by local authorities’. The regulatory body was renamed to Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media (REM) by the 2014 Law on Electronic Media, but did not become much more independent. Namely, the process of constitution of the REM Council remained problematic, and the Council barely functioned between 2017 and 2019, with three members fewer than the supposed nine. Financial independence could not be achieved either, since Parliament failed to discuss the REM’s annual reports and to approve its financial plans (Đurić and Dobrilović, 2019). Furthermore, any regulatory document issued by the REM had to be approved by the Ministry of Culture and Information as well.

Media and politics: instrumentalisation of media through political-business linkages

KEY FACTS AND EVENTS:

- 1998: Newly adopted Law on Public Information grants government broad powers to suppress media freedom through huge fines or outright closure.
- 1998–2000: Several independent media outlets shut down and heavy fines imposed under 1998 Law on Public Information.
- 2001: Law on Public Information repealed.
- 2007: Ministry of Culture and Information forms working group to draft law regulating media ownership transparency; draft law never submitted to Parliament.
- 2011: Anti-Corruption Council reports that in 2008–2010, ownership of 18 out of 30 most influential national media isn’t completely known.

- 2015: Anti-Corruption Council reports that 27 of 50 analysed media have non-transparent ownership.
- 2015: New Media Register, introduced by 2014 Law on Public Information and Media, becomes operational.

During the 1990s, the state-run media were turned into a propaganda machine used to justify Milošević's nationalistic claims (Kisić, 2015). In addition to exercising full control over TV Belgrade (later RTS), Milošević was a close friend and political ally of the owners of two new private TV stations – Željko Mitrović, owner of TV Pink and member of the Yugoslav Left (JUL), a party led by Milošević's wife, and Bogoljub Karić, owner of BK TV. Faced with growing public dissatisfaction and protests, Milošević took more severe measures to tighten control over state media or to intimidate independent media. The most drastic one was the Law on Public Information, adopted in 1998, which allowed 'the authorities to close down periodicals and independent radio stations the ruling elite [didn't] like' and 'to impose massive summary fines on managements, editors and journalists with no process for an appeal being allowed' (Gallagher, 2000: 121). One of the first decisions of the newly elected government in 2000 was to repeal this law in early 2001 and to reimburse 'several independent media outlets for the huge fines inflicted by the former regime' (Castaldo and Pinna, 2018: 271).

The new government also initiated the elaboration of a new legal framework for the media sector. However, despite the adoption of new media laws, many old issues remained unresolved and turned into enduring structural problems. First of all, the non-transparency of media ownership usually hid links with political actors. Data about the ownership structures of the media in Serbia were incomplete and unreliable, and the powers that be were constantly reluctant to empower the regulatory body to act upon adopted legislation. In 2007, the Ministry of Culture and Information formed a working group to draft a specific law regulating ownership issues (Veljanovski, 2009). Although the group came up with a draft law after a year and a half, the law was never adopted. The only step in this direction was the introduction of a new Media Register by the 2014 Law on Public Information and Media. The Media Register became operational in 2015. However, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network estimated the Media Register as inaccurate and the oversight of its implementation as inefficient (BIRN, 2017).

In its analysis of media problems in Serbia in the 2008–2010 period, the Anti-Corruption Council, an advisory body of the government,

found out that among the 30 most significant analyzed media (...), as many as 18 [did] not have a sufficiently transparent ownership, and their real owners are not known to the domestic public. The reason for this is primarily the presence of off-shore companies in the media ownership structure, whose primary purpose is to hide the real media owners and to conceal the interests of such media from the public in this way. (Anti-Corruption Council, 2011: 3)

As Irina Milutinović (2017: 373) explains further, 'The real end owners are often hard to identify as they are disguised behind proxy companies registered at addresses of law or consultancy firms that act in their clients' capacity.' For example, Serbian businessman Milan Beko declared in a TV interview in 2010 that he was actually behind the companies officially registered as the owners of the majority stake in the newspaper company *Novosti*, the publisher of one of the most read dailies in Serbia, *Večernje Novosti*. According to Izabela Kisić (2015: 80), Milan Beko holds a 62.24 percent share in *Večernje Novosti* and 'controls his share through three of his companies (Trimax Investments GmbH, Ardos Holding GmbH, and Karamat Holdings Ltd).' Beko is also politically well-connected. A member of the cabinet in the Milošević era, in 2009 he was close to the Democratic Party, while in the mid-2010s he moved closer to the Serbian Progressive Party (*ibid.*).

Similar ownership patterns and linkages can be identified between other influential media outlets and political parties. In 2011, the Anti-Corruption Council (2011: 7, 12, 13) revealed the linkages between the tabloid *Press* and the Democratic Party, the national Radio S and the Socialist Party of Serbia, and the tabloid *Pravda* and the Serbian Progressive Party, among others. Four years later, the Anti-Corruption Council (2015) reported that 27 out of 50 analysed media had 'non-transparent ownership, partially transparent or disputable' ownership. As Jovanka Matić and Dubravka Valić Nedeljković (2014: 344) point out, the existence of media which make barely any profit usually indicates hidden ownership by powerful tycoons. Such media are often used by informal alliances of businesspersons and political forces as an instrument against political opponents and business competitors. Although such alliances shift with the shift of power on the political scene, ties between media moguls and politicians remain persistent, at both the national and local levels.

Another major problem is the financial influence of state institutions on media through allocation of state advertising funds. According to the Anti-

Corruption Council (2011: 16), in the 2008–2010 period the total advertising market was around 160 million euros, of which between 36 and 40 million euros (or almost one quarter) came from state institutions. The biggest share of that came from the state telecommunications company Telekom Serbia, which spent more than 10 million euros a year directly for media services (ibid.: 20). Allocation of public funds was not supervised by any regulatory body. As Věra Stojarova (2020: 170) explains, advertising was, and is, a tool for silencing media since government-controlled public companies placed advertisements only in government-friendly media. Similarly, government-friendly media were favoured in allocation of state advertising funds. In 2008–2010, media earned income from the authorities and other state institutions in various ways, including on the basis of ‘specialized information services, contracted information services, subscriptions to services, cultural subsidies, allocations of money from the funds foreseen for the civil sector for implementation of projects, and even for research services’ (Anti-Corruption Council, 2011: 18). For example, in 2009 the Agency for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises paid the company Ringier (which publishes the most influential daily in Serbia, *Blic*) 4.48 million dinars (approximately 38,000 euros) for research services (ibid.). The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network revealed that in the 2011–2013 period, 33 municipalities spent almost 200 million dinars (approximately 1.7 million euros) in the media sector, based on direct contracting (BIRN, 2013: 3).

Political influence was also exercised through advertising agencies run by close friends and allies of politicians in important government positions, or even by high-ranking politicians themselves. During the presidency (2008–2012) of Boris Tadić (leader of the Democratic Party), two agencies controlled the advertising market: Universal McCann, owned by a close friend and advisor of Tadić, and Direct Media, owned by Dragan Đilas, vice-president of the Democratic Party and mayor of Belgrade (Veljanovski and Stavljanin, 2017: 63). The revenues of both agencies ‘skyrocketed’ due to deals with the state (Matić and Valić Nedeljković, 2014: 361).

Public service media captured by the state

KEY FACTS AND EVENTS:

- 2002: Law on Broadcasting introduces concept of public service broadcasting, foresees transformation of state-owned RTS into two separate public service broadcasters (RTS and RTV), and provides for financing through subscription fees.
- 2006: RTS and RTV start operating as public service broadcasters.
- 2014: Law on Public Service Media (PSM) regulates status and operation, and defines remit of public service broadcasters.
- 2019: Studies show PSM enjoy high levels of trust and audience ratings.

Within the decentralised Yugoslav media system, Radio Television Belgrade (RTB) developed as the main broadcaster in Serbia, along with Radio Television Novi Sad (in the province of Vojvodina) and Radio Television Priština (in the province of Kosovo and Metohija). Those relatively independent stations were amalgamated into a single, centralised state broadcaster, Radio Television Serbia (RTS), in 1992 (Radojković, 2019: 215). As Snježana Milivojević (2005: 1351) points out,

During the 1990s, RTS was under the direct control of the Milošević regime, which used it as its chief tool of political propaganda. More than 1,000 journalists and other staff were forced to leave RTS because the regime considered them politically unreliable. Many distinguished professionals among these later joined other media and continued to oppose repression. Subsequently, professional standards were degraded, as ‘patriotic journalism’ became the norm at RTS.

In order to keep up with the nationalistic tendencies and policies of the regime, RTS coverage of current events, especially ongoing wars in the region, was distorted. Therefore, RTS gradually lost its credibility with the audience, and the civic protests of 1996–1997 included protests against the biased reporting of RTS. In one form of protest against the regime propaganda on television, ‘throughout the major cities dissatisfied citizens – on streets, in front of their houses, on balconies – hit pans, rang bells and produced all kinds of other noises’ during the RTS prime-time news hour (Milivojević, 2005: 1351). Also, ‘During the anti-Milošević demonstrations on 5 October 2000, protestors stormed the RTS headquarters and set it on fire. Broadcasting ceased for

several hours and was restored under a new RTS symbol' (ibid.: 1352). Although it was a powerful symbol of democratisation at the time, the genuine transformation of RTS into a public service broadcaster would take years, with many ups and downs.

RTS began its transformation into a public service broadcaster after a decade of degradation. Aside from outdated equipment, during the 1999 NATO bombing many elements of the transmission system, some studios, the Avala television tower, and other technical assets were destroyed. Furthermore, RTS was without credibility, an overstaffed, massive enterprise that was hard to manage. With such a legacy, the legal groundwork for RTS's transformation was laid by the 2002 Law on Broadcasting, which 'introduced and defined public service broadcasting and stipulated the establishment of two public broadcasters – RTS, with its base in Belgrade, and RTV, with headquarters in Novi Sad' (Marko, 2017: 20). However, it was not until 2006 that the public service broadcasters (PSB) began operating, 'when all necessary preconditions were fulfilled (adopting the legislation, establishment of the regulatory body that further elected the PSB management, making license fee collection work, etc.)' (ibid.). RTS was not able to achieve autonomy over the following years, though, and its financial, organisational and editorial independence remained problematic.

The legal framework introduced in 2002 was aimed, among other things, at securing independent financing through subscription fees. However, the collection of fees was insufficient to support RTS. As Kisić (2015: 87) explains, 'With monthly fees of less than five Euros and total receipts between forty and seventy percent, *RTV Serbia* was among the "poorest" public broadcasting services in the region and in Europe.' After fee collection rates plummeted in 2012 and 2013, then prime minister Aleksandar Vučić kept his election promise to abolish the fee because it was a burden on households, and the fee was replaced by a tax under the Law on Public Service Media of 2014. The 2014 Law stipulates that the amount of tax is to be determined by the Steering Boards of RTS and RTV, that budget money must be allocated for precise purposes, and that financial management must be transparent. However, under this law, RTS and RTV have become dependent on the state budget and have lost some of their already weak financial independence.

The same law also defines procedures for the election of the RTS and RTV governing bodies, the Steering Board and Director General. The Steering Board is a supervisory body consisting of members appointed and dismissed by the REM.

The intention of the new legislation was to strengthen the role of the Steering Board and make the Director General more accountable. However, the Steering Board's work is strongly dependent on the regulatory authority, the REM, whose autonomy is questionable. Furthermore, it has become a common practice for directors general to be installed directly by the government or by the will of high political circles, usually sidelining the Steering Board (Marko, 2017). For example, shortly after Vojislav Koštunica was elected prime minister in 2004, his media consultant was appointed RTS Director General without a public call. According to Marko (2017: 24), 'The Steering Board has been marginalized, dominated by the Director General and his unilateral decisions and acts.'

All governments have shown much greater interest in controlling editorial policy than in securing independence of RTS. As the Anti-Corruption Council (2011: 4) pointed out, 'state authorities exercise special influence through RTS which, instead of being a public service to the citizens, is a service of political structures and productions which are closely connected with top officials of the parties in power.' Subsequent analysis of the aired programmes found political bias in reporting, and a tendency of RTS to act as a government mouthpiece (Matić, 2012; Veljanovski, 2016). Despite that, RTS has remained one of the most-watched TV channels in Serbia. According to Kisić (2015: 86), RTS had the best ratings in 2011, with a 24% share of the total television audience, as compared to private TV stations Pink (20%) and TV Prva (15%). More recent findings confirm that 'Serbian citizens have greater trust in public service media than in their private counterparts', and that 'daily use of PSM is higher than the average in the region' (Radojković, 2019: 230, 231).

The journalistic community: deeply divided and economically deprived

KEY FACTS AND EVENTS:

- 2006: First common Code of Ethics adopted by the main journalism associations.
- 2009: First self-regulatory body, the Press Council, established.
- 2014: EU progress reports start highlighting deteriorating conditions for full exercise of freedom of expression in Serbia.

During Socialist Yugoslavia, the distinct idea of ‘self-managing journalism’, with journalists understood as advocates of the working class, collective agitators, propagandists of the proletariat, was dismantled under the political and economic post-WWII circumstances (Splichal and Vreg, 1986: 51). Journalists were defined as ‘socio-political workers’ by the 1973 Code of Yugoslav Journalists (ZNJ, 1973), and they worked as ‘the state bureaucratic apparatus’ (Splichal, 1981). Such a legacy was conducive to turning journalists of the state media (*Politika*, *Večernje Novosti*, RTS, Tanjug) into tools of nationalistic propaganda during the Milošević era (Thompson, 1999; Kisić, 2015; Volčić, 2006). Most independent media that emerged in the 1990s as ‘a response to the regime’s repression’ (such as the daily *Naša Borba*, Radio B92, the news agencies Beta and Fonet) were not after profit, ‘but involved a “defense of the profession and of the right to free expression”’ (Kisić, 2015: 67).

The division between independent and pro-government media reflected onto the journalistic community. The cleavage between journalists involved in ‘war-mongering propaganda’ and journalists dedicated to protecting ‘professionalism and ethics’ was evident from the establishment of independent journalists’ associations in the 1990s (Kisić, 2015: 90). As pro-regime journalists had their own association, the Journalists’ Association of Serbia (UNS), which had been under governmental control, three new associations assembled reporters for independent media outlets: the Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia (NUNS), the Independent Journalists’ Association of Vojvodina (NDNV), and the Association of Independent Broadcast Media (ANEM) (ibid.). Collisions between journalists and associations continued long after 2000.

Several months after the end of the Milošević regime, the government ‘appointed new management in all the state-run media, the appointments themselves reflecting the “distribution of power” among the parties of the victorious coalition’ (Kisić, 2015: 70). However,

the state-run media in the service of the regime and its war-mongering propaganda in the 1990s survived the transition. Hardly any lustration had taken place in the media’s domain. Only editors-in-chief and some of the most stringent propagandists of the Milošević era lost their jobs. (Ibid.)

At the same time, independent media, which were used to international donations in the 1990s, struggled to become economically viable on a weak market. This led them to diverge from public interest towards

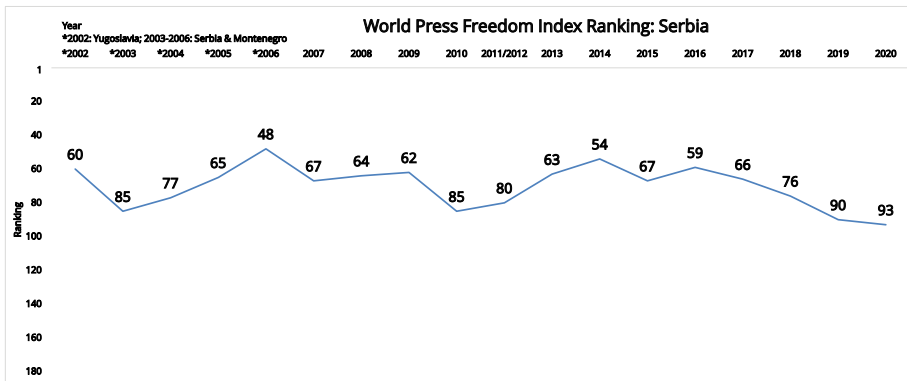
commercialisation and political alliances. Moreover, political tabloids flourished, totally degrading 'journalistic ethics and discourse by running fabrications about individuals and their private lives, pornography, etc., while also promoting hate speech' (ibid.).

Instead of the expected lustration and fundamental change in the field of journalism after the end of the Milošević regime, divisions, political alliances, economic and professional deterioration continued. The tensions between journalists' associations did not subside. NUNS and Independent electronic media association (ANEM) representatives among other non-governmental organisations were included in the working groups tasked with drafting media laws that would lay the groundwork for 'free flow of information, and media independence from political and other centres of power' (Veljanovski, 2009: 50). The work on drafting new laws did not proceed smoothly, and neither consensus among the relevant actors nor media freedom were achieved. The associations disagreed on many issues, including on the professional codes. The first common Code of Ethics was adopted by the main journalism associations in 2006. The first, and so far only, self-regulatory body, the Press Council, was established in 2009, but started working two years later.

Lack of cohesion and self-regulation in the professional community leaves journalists exposed to various forms of pressure. The lack of autonomy has been confirmed by many studies (Široka, 2005; Kujundžić and Kožul, 2007; Janković et al., 2009; Radojković, Milojević and Ugrinić, 2014), and journalists continuously report that they work under pressure from political parties, government officials, PR officers of big advertisers, while media owners are usually caught up in clientelistic relations with political and business elites (Milojević and Krstić, 2018). External pressures on media are often felt more strongly at the local than at the national level.

Surveys among journalists show that their level of education is getting higher. According to Milivojević (2011: 17), in 2011 a total of 73% of journalists had university education, compared to 56% in 2002. However, higher education has not led to stronger professionalisation. As the Media Sustainability Index 2012 showed, freedom of expression and professional journalism in Serbia had improved marginally since 2001 (IREX: 130). Although the regulatory framework has become more stable in recent years, journalistic freedom is still in decline: 'since 2014 the EU progress reports started to emphasize more and more insistently the deteriorating conditions for the full exercise of freedom of expression in Serbia' (Castaldo and Pinna, 2018: 276).

According to Freedom House's *Nations in Transit 2014* report, the radio morning show *Mentalno Razgibavanje* (Mental Exercises) 'was taken off the air in December [2013] after the hosts made references to [Prime Minister Aleksandar] Vučić's private life. NUNS expressed concern that the suspension was political [although the] station said the show was temporarily shelved to make room for holiday programs' (Savic, 2014: 553). The following year, B92 Television stopped airing Serbia's most popular political talk show, *Utišak Nedelje* (Impression of the Week), 'under apparent government pressure' (Savic, 2015). The host of the show, 'Olja Bečković, accused Prime Minister Vučić of pulling strings that led to the cancellation' because he 'was reportedly angered by his opponents' frequent appearances on the weekly show' (ibid.). In August 2014, after publishing a critical report against the government, BIRN journalists were accused by the newspaper *Informer* and other pro-government media 'of being "spies" backed by the EU', while Vučić declared that the report had been 'financed by a wealthy businessman facing corruption charges' (Castaldo and Pinna, 2018: 276). In January 2015, after BIRN released a report on a case of misconduct in a public tender, Vučić accused BIRN 'of spreading lies and, even worse, he claimed that the EU was behind this attack aiming to destabilize his government' (ibid.). Such claims were supported by *Informer*, which published a series of follow-up articles against BIRN, and TV Pink, another pro-government media outlet, which 'aired a four-hour special, which had among its guests the interior minister Nebojša Stefanović claiming that the EU funded BIRN and other media groups in order to destabilize Serbia' (ibid.). Similarly, in March 2016, the director of the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK) was accused of being a 'French spy' by *Informer*, which published 'details that could only be obtained through illegal surveillance by security services' (ibid.).



Source: Reporters Without Borders.

Serbia's deeply divided, economically deprived journalistic community has been unable to attain the much-needed autonomy, trust and societal recognition. The Serbian public perceives the media as one of the least trustworthy institutions, unfree, dishonest and corrupt (Pjesivac, 2017). According to the Serbian participants in a study conducted in Serbia, Macedonia, and Croatia in 2013 and 2014 by Ivanka Pjesivac, Katerina Spasovska and Iveta Imre (2016: 340), news media could not be trusted because they are 'controlled by different sources of power' and serve as 'pure instruments for the realization of their controllers' interests'. The Serbians interviewed in this study pointed out that underpaid journalists, under political and economic pressures, 'often cede to censorship and corruption', taking money from politicians and oligarchs to cover up important facts, create scandals, or serve as 'publishers of only official information "that politicians give them during press conferences"' (ibid.: 337).

Digitalisation and online media environment: internet-based protests, publics and counter publics

KEY FACTS AND EVENTS:

- 1998: Formation of Otpor, the most influential of many resistance groups, and the most sophisticated in the use of internet and other communications technologies for overthrowing Milošević.
- 2010: Newly adopted Law on Electronic Communications allows authorities to maintain database on citizens' electronic communications, and security and police forces to access information without prior permission.
- 2017: First internet-born, grassroots protest (Protest Against Dictatorship) held, followed by internet counter-campaign.

The Milošević regime was weakened and finally overthrown in October 2000 after massive protest demonstrations in Belgrade, the result of long resistance. Organised resistance against Milošević was deeply integrated into the use of the internet. Tunnard (2003) has stressed the key role of the Otpor (Resistance) movement in overthrowing Milošević. Otpor was initiated in 1996 by the users of the small Serbian internet service provider Sezam Pro, mostly students at Belgrade University, who began emailing each other

shortly after Milošević annulled the November elections, and quickly grew into a resistance community with a network of affiliates throughout the country. They communicated from public computers, which gave them almost complete anonymity and kept their activities hidden from the authorities. At its peak, Otpor was able to assemble rallies of more than 100,000, using only the power of e-mail. Furthermore, 'mass e-mail campaigns became a common way for the foreign press to be informed of what was happening inside Serbia' (Tunnard, 2003: 113). Otpor's first public communication was on its website, and the internet was crucial in maintaining close ties and consultations with its greatest benefactor, the US. The heavy restrictions imposed by the government on the independent media were circumvented via the internet. For example, when in December 1996 the only independent radio station in Belgrade, Radio B92, was shut down by the government, 'its signal was immediately rerouted via the Internet to a host in the Netherlands, thus making it available to the entire outside world as well' (ibid.).

Recent grassroots movements and protests show that the internet remains one of the most important resources for political activism in Serbia. According to Dalibor Petrović (2016), the recent appearance of grassroots movements such as the initiative *Ne davimo Beograd* (NDMBGD) (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own) signals the restructuring of the civil sector in Serbia, which was dominated by NGOs mainly financed by foreign donors. Based on an analysis of NDMBGD's use of Facebook for mobilising, informing, and recruiting supporters, Petrović (ibid.) argues that digital platforms are very important for political activism, especially when certain societal groups feel that mainstream media are closed to their ideas. There are certain warnings about the existence of 'self-censorship in media due to the pressures from different interest groups, or media financial dependence from those groups, resulting in uneven treatment of different political actors or open favorizing of the ruling party in election campaign' (Pavlica, Gavrilović and Đapić, 2017: 75). The case of the Protest Against Dictatorship can be illustrative in this regard.

The Protest Against Dictatorship began spontaneously a day after the 2017 presidential elections. It 'was the first articulation of public disapproval of the decline of democratic standards and the rise of illiberal leadership in Serbia' (Kleut and Milojević, 2021: 82). Initiated by a single Facebook post, it brought out tens of thousands of protestors across Serbia and lasted for a month. Social media played a crucial role in its organisation. Facebook groups served as communication platforms for 'planning and defining protest goals, coordinating participants and activities, and as the main means of disseminating information

and mobilising support' (Petrović and Petrović, 2017: 422). At the same time, this protest triggered mobilisation of counter-publics, demonstrating how the internet is used for political propaganda.



Cover of the weekly magazine Vreme (12 October 2000) dedicated to the protest events on 5 October 2000.



Front page of the daily newspaper Danas (11 April 2017) covering Protest Against Dictatorship in 2017.

Since the protest was organised mainly via the 'Against Dictatorship' Facebook page, ten days after it started a fake, cloned Facebook page was created (Petrović, 2018: 21). It was used for an astroturfing campaign, spreading 'alternative' information, and creating confusion by: questioning the causes of the protest; claiming that the protest was losing momentum and meaning; criticising the organisation of the protest for lack of synchronisation and material resources, etc.; pointing out the loose leadership as a significant deficiency (ibid.: 25). The fake page was successful. It attracted many more followers than the original, mostly due to sponsored posts, and contributed to the weakening of the protest and disintegration of the protest network. However, this example is just one manifestation of the much wider web-based political propaganda in Serbia.

According to Dalibor Petrović (2018), the government uses the internet for political propaganda in a highly organised and sophisticated way. There are indications that many comments on the main news portals are created by 'bots' and posted through a specialised platform called Tvrđava (Fortress). The term 'bot' in Serbia refers to a real person who is paid by political actors to conduct propaganda, or to post messages online in their interest. Petrović (ibid.: 20) states that according to a document that was revealed by accident, 'in 2018, 3,456 party activists were employed as "bots" for the Serbian Progressive Party, delivering around 10 million comments on 201,717 news stories'. Besides shaping public opinion through commentary on news, heavy verbal attacks on politically unlike-minded people are common on Twitter and other social media. Furthermore, very few people have been arrested and prosecuted for messages posted online (Petrović, 2018; Surčulija Milojević, 2015). Those and other such activities intimidate freedom of expression on the internet, and have led to strong polarisation of Serbia's online public sphere.

Jelena Surčulija Milojević (2015: 605) has pointed out 'take-down/removal of Internet content for political reasons' as a problem in Serbia. There were several such cases during the 2014 election campaign. The first case involved the removal from YouTube of satirical videos made out of an RTS report showing the Prime Minister carrying a boy to the rescuing helicopter after the boy was rescued from a blizzard. Almost overnight, many parodies of the report were released and in the next few days they were removed due to infringement of copyright. Second, two blogs were taken down for criticising Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić for his decisions and behaviour during the state of emergency declared over a heavy flood in the town of Obrenovac: the blog Teleprompter was removed for criticising the behaviour of the Prime Minister at government

meetings; the entire blog section of the *Blic* daily's website was removed after the publication of a text by journalist Dragan Todorović calling for the Prime Minister's resignation because of his responsibility for the delayed reaction to the flood, among other reasons. Finally, another popular form of taking down internet content was the hacking of websites – such as Peščanik, a radio programme on Radio B92 that had been forced to move online so as to continue to offer independent content, which was under hacker attacks for six days after publishing a letter of Serbian scientists 'claiming that the PhD of the Minister of Interior was a plagiarism' (ibid.: 606). Those cases drove Dunja Mijatović, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFOM), to take a public stand, urging 'the authorities to nurture uncensored debate on issues of public interest' and warning that the arrest of people for their writing was 'not acceptable (...) and can lead to self-censorship' (ibid.).

Conclusions

Considering that Serbia was the largest constituent part of 'the most "liberal" communist country', to quote Nebojša Vladislavljević (2020: 29), Serbia was 'widely expected to move fast on the road to democracy and EU integration after the end of communism but ended up in new authoritarianism and war'. The process of transition to democracy in Serbia started a decade later than in other communist countries, and was shaped by the legacy of an authoritarian regime, war, and economic devastation.

Following such a historical path, the trajectory of Serbia's media market transformation can be roughly divided into three periods according to the introduction and implementation of structural media laws and regulatory mechanisms. In the first period (1991–2000), 'the Serbian media system featured elements of a state-market model' (Milutinović, 2017: 368). New legislation allowed for the establishment of private media, which were competing with state media and forming a market. However, the market was weak and heavily influenced by the government, with state ownership of the major media, a chaotic legal framework, lack of independent regulatory bodies, and control over distribution of frequencies and newsprint. The second and third periods, those of the Serbian media system's democratic transition, were demarcated by the year 2014 (ibid.: 371–372). During the first phase of this transition (2000–2014), a new regulatory framework was introduced, but the implementation of laws was slow and inconsistent, and there was a lack of political and professional will for reforms. A set of new media laws, adopted in

mid-2014, were designed to be 'a step forward to the second, more successful phase of media transition', enabling completion of media privatisation, securing transparency of media ownership, and achieving functional independence of regulatory bodies (ibid.: 372). As of December 2020, however, a number of problems remain unresolved.

Despite the existence of a democratic legal framework, the main structural features of the media landscape in Serbia – high fragmentation and saturation – have undermined the economic sustainability of media. Therefore, media often enter into political partnerships in order to secure preferential treatment in the allocation of state funds and state advertising, and capital investments and advertising revenues from their business allies. In return, media provide positive coverage to their political/business affiliates. To keep these hidden from the public, media ownership remains largely non-transparent.

Those features are observable in the functioning of the Serbian public service media. Although the independent governance and funding of the PSM are guaranteed by law, in practice PSM are highly dependent on the state budget and under heavy political influence. The appointment and dismissal of their managing bodies and directors general have never been autonomous, and many experts warn that the director general and board members are usually known in advance. Furthermore, PSM are funded from the state budget, although the law provides for financing by subscription fees. Therefore, Serbia's PSM have not achieved sufficient editorial and financial independence yet.

The journalistic profession has also been struggling to adapt to the fundamental systemic changes, transitioning from the 'self-managed' and 'state-managed' to the 'public service' model. According to the latest Code of Ethics (Savet za štampu, 2015: 5), journalists are obliged to serve the public by providing true and genuine information. This definition of journalistic duty is in line with the traditional liberal ideas of democracy. However, despite the shift towards the normatively ideal role of journalism in society, journalists have not been able to achieve professional autonomy, stability or credibility. The profession has been working under difficult conditions, suffering from low social respect, low wages, and high pressures from co-workers, editors, politicians, and advertisers.

Overall, strong influence of the state, political partnerships, clientelism, and low professional autonomy have been steady features of the media system in Serbia over the last thirty years. Those features have been translated into the online media environment, although the internet has been one of the

important factors for democratisation in Serbia. During the Milošević regime, ‘many of the resistance communities formed themselves in cyberspace; and several new technologies and applications were innovatively used to outwit the government’ (Tunnard, 2003: 112). Recent grassroots movements and protests show that the internet remains an important resource for political activism. However, there are strong indications that the internet is also used for political propaganda, that freedom of expression might be endangered, and that self-censorship is increasing.

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