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A step ahead or a Potemkin reform village?

Serbia`s Media Strategy 2020 – 2025

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Is Serbia's new Media Strategy 2020-25, adopted a year ago, just a paper tiger or an important step towards safeguarding the threatened freedom of the press? The years of struggle for the document, and also the experience with the first Media Strategy adopted ten years ago, have confirmed above all that paper is very patient in the Balkans. And that the actual implementation of formulated goals requires not only an effective action plan and laws, but more importantly the political will to remove the media from the grasp and control of state power.

Head of Government Ana Brnabić was certainly not lacking noble words after the laborious and years-delayed birth of Serbia's new Media Strategy in January 2020. Thanking the members of the working group, the prime minister said after the adoption of the 86-page document that aims to safeguard Serbia's threatened press freedom and regulate the development of media markets in the Balkan state until 2025: "This is a first step. We remain dedicated to this work."

Serbia's media reality, however, looks rather different. A good two months after the green light from the Government for the Strategy, developed together with the professional associations, Serbia hit the headlines on 1 April 2020 as the first country in Europe where a journalist was arrested for her unpopular Corona reporting. Brnabić called the arrest of journalist Ana Lalić, who had reported on abuses at the Novi Sad hospital centre for the portal nova.rs, a "stupid decision", but expressed anger about "people who lie". Although subsequently no charges were brought against the journalist, there was no government apology for the completely unfounded accusation of lying.

Due not least to pressure from the EU, Belgrade adopted an action plan for the implementation of the Strategy in December, which was again worked out with the professional associations. "We will not tolerate any threats against journalists, that is the red line for us", Brnabić announced at the time.

But politicians in the EU candidate country find it difficult to accept the control function of an independent media as the fourth power in the state. Instead, dignitaries continue to practice unabated media bashing. In mid-February, for example, Brnabić once again castigated the TV station N1 as a "political opponent" and admitted that she had instructed the institution responsible for organising Corona vaccinations, E-uprava, not to provide the station with any information – according to former Data Protection Commissioner Rodoljub Šabić, a clear violation of the law on access to information. In December, her party colleague, SNS MP Biljana Pantić Pilja, took an even more drastic approach to the unpopular cable channels N1 and NovaS: the "anti-Serbian media" could only be described as "domestic traitors, foreign mercenaries", the MP raged in parliament.

Media strategy 2011-2016

The double face of the SNS rulers, who on the one hand vow to ensure freedom of the press, but on the other have been trying to control and gag the media to the best of their ability for years, does not merely make the professional associations doubt the government's will to implement the Media Strategy and the action plan. For although a first Media Strategy was adopted in 2011 to improve the situation of journalists and the media, that situation has deteriorated significantly over the past decade.

In 2020, NUNS¹ registered 189 cases of assault, threats and pressure on journalists – the highest since it began recording them in 2008. On the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index, Serbia has fallen around 30 places to 93rd in the last five years. At the end of February, the former SNS mayor of Grocka, Dragoljub Simonović, was sentenced to four years and three months imprisonment for arson for having let two accomplices burn down the house of local journalist Milan Jovanović in 2018. Yet although both the professional associations and the government welcomed the verdict, which is not yet legally binding, assaults against journalists are only punished in exceptional cases in Serbia. According to a study now published by the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation and the CEPRIS Centre, only one in ten reported attacks and threats against journalists is sanctioned with the eventual conviction of the perpetrators – mostly with rather light sentences.

¹ Nezavisno udruženje novinara Srbije – Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia

Hopes that the new Media Strategy could change Serbia's media reality are limited among journalists. Vukašin Obradović, the former president of the journalists' union NUNS, who was involved in the drafting of the first Media Strategy adopted in 2011, but who withdrew from all working groups two years ago, warns against the creation of "another Potemkin village": "Since 2011, the state has practically increased its grip on the media."

The withdrawal of the state from the media, and the strengthening of the supervisory bodies, as well as the better regulation of the rapidly changing media markets, were already the goals of Serbia's first Media Strategy, which was adopted by the last DS government in September 2011 for the following five years (until 2016) in accordance with EU requirements.

However, the laws necessary for its implementation were not passed for some considerable time. After coming to power in the 2012 elections, the SNS initially showed only moderate interest. It was not until 2014 that several new versions of laws were passed – such as those on public information and media, electronic media and public broadcasting. Essentially, they provided for the privatisation of state media and more power for the Electronic Media Supervisory Board (REM). Instead, the state was to promote the media indirectly – with grants for eligible media projects at both municipal and national levels.

Goals reversed

However, instead of loosening state access to the media as desired by the EU, the ruling SNS party's control over the media has increased since 2014. NUNS Secretary General Tamara Filipović, who was involved in drafting the new Media Strategy, cites several reasons for this.

Since 2014, the number of state broadcasters has shrunk to less than a quarter of the 81 that existed at that time: "But some of the key media – such as the Tanjug agency or the newspapers *Politika* and *Novosti*, which eroded competition in the media markets – remained state-owned until recently."

The Tanjug state agency had already been declared defunct in 2015, but continued to operate with the help of state contracts. According to the action plan adopted in December to implement the new Media Strategy, Tanjug is now finally to be privatised by the end of March. The government has announced that it will give the logo and the use of the Tanjug archive to a consortium of a singer and two businessmen – including media tycoon Radoica Milosavljević (see below) – for €600,000. "We don't know yet exactly what the Tanjug solution will look like", says Filipović.

Novosti was sold to Boban Rajić, a businessman until then completely unknown in the media sector, and his company Media026 in Smederevo in 2019. The state still holds a 50 per cent stake in *Politika*. The German WAZ Group ceded its stake, acquired in 2001, in 2012; it remains unclear who is behind the Russian *Ekonom*:east-Media Group as co-owner of the newspaper. According to the action plan, the state should withdraw completely from *Politika* by the end of the year.

Although Belgrade seems to have at least formally fulfilled the EU requirements of state withdrawal with regard to these three national media, both the non-transparent ownership structure and the buyers point to further cases of so-called 'party privatisation'. How the ruling party, with the help of entrepreneurs and 'investors' from its circle of influence, has strengthened its grip on the media is particularly evident in the privatisation of municipal radio and TV stations in the country.

Filipović reports that, after 2014, state-owned regional TV and radio stations in particular were privatised. Some of them have since been discontinued. Most, however, were bought by party-affiliated investors with the very money that was supposed to be used for co-financing media projects: "An investor buys a medium and uses it to apply for funding for media projects. In this way, he immediately receives back from the state the money with which he bought the media from the state – sometimes even a higher sum. The goals of the first Media Strategy have thus been completely misappropriated and turned into their opposite. In fact, we are in a worse position than we were in 2011."

The Serbian Murdoch from Kruševac

One example of the "party privatisation" Filipović deplores is the media empire of the businessman Radoica Milosavljević from Kruševac, which emerged after 2014. The former functionary of the co-ruling SPS is considered a friend of the head of the secret service and leading SNS politician Bratislav Gašić,

who is also from Kruševac: according to the research portal CINS, Milosavljević is one of 27 sponsors of the ruling SNS who jointly acquired a 590-square-metre property in New Belgrade in 2019 and donated it to the ruling party.

The owner of a plastic processing factory was to make national headlines for the first time in 2015, when “Serbia’s Murdoch from Kruševac” acquired a total of eight local stations during the privatisation of state media: RT Kruševac, RT Kragujevac, TV Pirot, RT Brus, TV-Požega, RT Dimitrovgrad and RT Pančevo, as well as the Novi Kneževac information centre. The purchase price for the stations was in the five-digit euro range in each case: Milosavljević is said to have invested a total of around a quarter of a million euros in the purchase of the local stations at the time. Due to violations of the privatisation requirements, the purchase of the station in Kragujevac was declared invalid in 2017, but Milosavljević has subsequently acquired other stations in Leskovac, Čačak, Zrenjanin, Paraćin and Bačka Palanka, as well as an unknown number of shareholdings. He has contradicted himself several times about his not yet transparent media ownership, at times speaking of eleven media outlets and ten holdings, at others of eight broadcasters and six holdings.

The consequences of the privatisation of local radio and TV stations and the switch to state or municipal project funding under EU pressure proved fatal for both the journalists employed by the stations and media consumers. Editorial teams have been radically thinned out or re-staffed – and are much more dependent on and exposed to the covetousness of local political lords than before. Ultimately, privatisation and the rapid rise of Serbia’s Murdoch has led to an impoverishment of the plurality of the regional media landscape. At the same time, the conditions of existence for non-party-affiliated regional broadcasters has become more acute. Because of the poor financial situation of his station, TV Fira, in Zaječar, its owner Saša Firović explained in 2019 that he was thinking of selling it. He complained at the time that his station had not received any funding from the municipality for three years: “What is happening here is a kind of revanchism. Because we report as we see fit and not as the municipality dictates.”

How journalism works in Milosavljević’s empire, on the other hand, was demonstrated by an instruction leaked to the independent web portal Južne Vesti in January 2019, which all his local TV stations received by email with the subject line “Urgent!” from an anonymous editor. “Đilas, Hitler and Sergej – these are the three topics that must be given space in our information programme”, said the service email, aimed at opposition politicians Dragan Đilas and Sergej Trifunović.

Privatisation consequences also affect private media

Milosavljević’s broadcasters receive particularly generous annual allocations of municipal and state media subsidies. According to the web portal Raskrikavanje.rs, his stations received more than 50 million dinars (approx. €427,000) from municipal coffers in 2018 – a good third of which went to his station in Kruševac alone.

NUNS Secretary General Tamara Filipović puts the amount of annual state subsidies for media projects at €10-12 million. According to NUNS, the lion’s share of the state funds goes to government-affiliated media at the national level, even if tabloids like *Informer*, *Srpski Telegraf* and *Alo!* or TV stations disqualify themselves for state funding with regular violations of the press code. Under previous governments, awarding overpriced contracts and advertisements from state-owned companies had already become a popular means of using state power to cross-subsidise favourable media, or to punish the unfavourable by withdrawing the same.

In contrast, the private independent local media, which were often founded before the fall of ex-autocrat Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s, have run into increasing problems. The weekly magazine *Vranjske*, which ceased publication in 2017, is a case study in how the intimidation of advertisers, threats against journalists and discrimination in the allocation of municipal funding and increased financial inspections are accelerating the death of the last independent local media. Never has the pressure been so great and never has the scope for independent media been so small, lamented *Vranjske* editor-in-chief and former NUNS chairman Vukašin Obradović after the local magazine, founded in 1991, was shut down: “Even under Milošević there was greater media plurality than now.”

Problem child electronic media

REM, the supervisory body for electronic media, which hardly ever sanctions even the grossest violations of the code on the part of government-affiliated private broadcasters such as TV Pink or Happy, has also been increasingly brought under SNS control in recent years. With the exception of the public broadcaster RTS, only channels favourable to the government can be received throughout the country. Using the state-owned Telekom, which in recent years has become the second-largest cable TV provider by buying up several smaller cable network operators, Belgrade is trying to pull the rug from under the feet of the disliked private United Group (UG) cable TV stations N1 and Nova. In January, tensions between the two companies were exacerbated by a Telekom strategy paper that was made public, in which the “final break-up” of UG’s cable network operator SBB is named as the goal of the planned cable cooperation with mobile phone competitor Telenor: If its market share shrinks, the UG subsidiary will hardly have the “capacity” to invest in its channels and programme content.

Filipović, on the other hand, sees a “slight opening” in recent months at the public broadcaster RTS – also as a result of the negotiations moderated by the European Parliament on fairer electoral conditions between the governing parties and parts of the opposition: “Some experts who have not been invited to the RTS studio for years because their opinions differ from those of the government are now having their say again on RTS.”

Tug of war over the new Media Strategy

Although the last Media Strategy had already expired in 2016, the SNS government struggled for a long time with the elaboration of a new Strategy. In protest against its working methods, in 2017 the professional associations left the joint working group that was supposed to draft a new Media Strategy. It was not until mid-2018 that a new working group was set up with the participation of the professional associations, following pressure from the international community. In early 2019, the draft of the new Media Strategy 2020-25 was submitted and indeed adopted by the Government, but in May 2019 Belgrade sent a version to Brussels that had been heavily amended on crucial points. The recommendation to exclude the Parliamentary Committee on Culture from the nomination of REM members disappeared from the draft, as did the clear description of the requirements that REM members and candidates would have to fulfill.

Belgrade subsequently spoke of the “accidental” transfer of a “false version”. Ultimately, the new Media Strategy 2020-25, developed with the mediation of the EU, OSCE, Norwegian Embassy and Konrad Adenauer Foundation, was only adopted by the government in January 2020.

Media Strategy 2020-25

Strengthening the independence of the REM, greater transparency of media markets through the clear identification of ownership and financing, as well as strengthening media plurality, media freedom, and improving the protection of journalists are among the most important points of the Strategy. It recommends, among other things, that the REM should monitor election coverage more actively through more effective media monitoring. It also points out that the existing media laws hardly do justice to the technological changes in web TV, Internet, You-Tube, or social media. The new Strategy calls for the Press Council and REM to have a stronger role in the allocation of funding, says Filipović: “After all, it is about the use of citizens’ tax money.”

All the issues and problems in Serbia’s media sector are “very well analysed and presented” in the strategy, Filipović continues: “But paper is patient. If the media strategy is not applied, it is completely worthless.” Whether and how the strategy is implemented ultimately depends solely “on the political will of the current government elites”: “Personally, I don’t necessarily believe in the good will of the Government, which has already tried to play us off several times.”

Concrete control mechanisms

Even with the old Media Strategy and the laws passed in 2014, it would have been possible to realise a “completely normally regulated media scene”, Filipović clarifies: “The laws at that time were approved by Brussels and were oriented towards the fundamental European values.” The new Media Strategy has “more or less” the same goals as the old one. However, the authors of the new Strategy, and the action plan with 13 legislative amendments for its implementation, agreed on more concrete deadlines and mechanisms for reviewing their results. These should increase the transparency not only of the

appointment of the REM, but also of the ownership structure of the media markets and the allocation of funding: “We have created an excellent document. But if you don’t want to realise the basic goal of a law, you can always find 1001 ways to get around it. And if there are no more independent institutions that point out abuses in time, it will be difficult to do anything. Because in our hijacked society, the police and judiciary are also under pressure.”

The EU strikes a tougher tone

For a long time, the EU Commission was surprisingly long-suffering when it came to the increasing strangulation of the Serbian media. During their regular visits to Belgrade, EU dignitaries such as the former EU Neighbourhood Commissioner Johannes Hahn or the former Serbia rapporteur of the European Parliament David MacAllister used to praise the authoritarian SNS leader and current head of state Aleksandar Vučić for his “path of reforms”. During a visit to Belgrade in 2015, an irritated Hahn brushed off an annoying journalist’s question about his opinion on press censorship in his host country. “What’s going on here in media policy can be seen from a mile off. But the EU is not interested in that because of Kosovo”, sociology professor Jovo Bakić commented bitterly at the time, noting the conspicuous disinterest of Brussels dignitaries in the state of the Serbian media.

Serbia’s cooperation with The Hague and the extradition of war criminals initially had priority for the EU, while subsequently Serbia’s rapprochement with Kosovo took this place, Filipović states: “Our human rights fell by the wayside. And that cost us a lot, we paid dearly for it.”

But in Brussels, too, patience with Vučić, the supposed bearer of hope, is wearing thin: for the first time since 2014, Serbia has not been able to open a new chapter in the accession negotiations because of the lack of progress in the 2020 EU rapprochement. The last two progress reports of the EU Commission have been “much more concrete” in terms of naming the shortcomings in press freedom and human rights, Filipović said. It is incomprehensible, however, that for seven or eight years the EU Commission’s reports have always used the expression “no progress” instead of “regression”: “The situation of journalists has deteriorated considerably.”

In the meantime, the European Parliament and the current Serbia rapporteur, Vladimír Bilčík, have adopted a much harsher tone towards Belgrade. As N1 reported in mid-February, the amendments to his report, which have already been approved, complain about the “aggressive tone” of the ruling party towards journalists and the “deterioration” of media freedom: Belgrade is expected to take “urgent measures” to safeguard freedom of expression and the independence of the media.

No alternative to dialogue

Of all things, a Government that relies on media control wants to fight for press freedom. Is Serbia’s new Media Strategy just a paper tiger or an important step towards safeguarding the threatened freedom of the press?

The disillusioned professional associations have no misconceptions about the motivation of the SNS Government for the joint elaboration of the new Media Strategy and the action plan for its implementation. The Government wants to “demonstrate to the outside world” that it is ready to deal with the problem of media freedom, says NUNS Secretary General Tamara Filipović. But despite occasional gestures of goodwill and the “declarative” condemnations of attacks against journalists, she could “not see any sincere desire on the part of the Government to improve the situation”. For future generations, however, the media strategy could be “an excellent guide to action”: “If one day someone really wants to improve the working conditions of journalists and the media, this document will certainly be useful.”

But it is not only with a view to the future that Filipović explains why her union remains in dialogue with the Government despite doubts about the good intentions of the interlocutors: “We communicate constantly with state institutions such as the police and judiciary. Because we don’t have another state and we can’t organise our own army or prosecutor’s office to protect our journalists.” However, the increasing pressure on the profession is causing an increasing number of journalists to leave their jobs and industry: “Most students who start studying journalism at the University of Belgrade today do not even want to become journalists. They study with the intention of finding a job in the PR industry later on.”

