



South East European Network
for Professionalization of Media

JOURNALISM IN TIMES OF CRISIS:

Case studies in six SEE countries

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1. Introduction:

Media systems in South East Europe failed to fulfil the promise of democratization of the public sphere enthusiastically proclaimed in the transition period. This has become clear especially since the important initial progress witnessed in the countries of the region was gradually halted. As many studies show, media integrity has been eroded in recent years.

Today, the contribution of the media to public debates in countries of SEE is considered highly controversial, with strong and manifold patterns of interference with media freedoms by different actors, including the state among the most dominant ones. Instruments of interference vary from the most open ones, such as violence and threats against journalists, through concealed practices of pressuring editors and journalists to comply with the interests of the owners and their affiliates, to soft censorship. Media ownership and funding, as well as appointments of editors and recruitment of journalists based on the assessment that their attitude is already de-antagonized towards these interests, are all believed to have been deployed to exert influence on editorial policies. Media outlets are, for example, used as tools to pacify or antagonize the electorate to legitimize political power. Equally detrimental is the frequent use of media platforms to advance particular business interests.

Media policies are underdeveloped and insufficient to protect public interest. Lack of transparency of media ownership and funding make the interferences in media sector elude both the regulation and the public eye. Government funding for media is executed in a way that casts doubts on its legitimacy and public interest value, suggesting it is likely misused for particular political and economic interests. Funding from private sector is even less transparent. With the general scarcity of sources of funding, media are overly dependent on few dominant sources of revenues. Finally, the relevant state institutions are too weak to provide efficient protection of labour rights in general, and editorial independence and journalistic autonomy in particular. Therefore, neither media outlets, nor editors and journalists have the power to resist interference with media freedoms to become agents of media integrity.

Against such gloomy background, even the very ideas of watchdog journalism and public service role of journalism are fading away as journalistic integrity remains endemic, pushed to the margins of media mainstream. They are maintained at rare media platforms that still attempt to nurture editorial independence and quality reporting. Respect for professional norms is low overall. (For example, MSI IREX in some countries gives lower scores to the quality of journalism than the media policies and economic environment.)

This research project focuses on media reporting of and in crisis situations, with case studies of examples mostly from 2016. Political and social crises have been recurring in recent years, aggravated by unstable political environments, underdeveloped economies, ethno-national divisions and unresolved legacies of war. They ranged from political clashes, government crises, through crisis involving citizen protests or pertaining to response to natural disasters,

to refugee crises. As indicated by the national reports from five successor states of the former Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Serbia) and Albania, in the analysed cases of crises, the media largely failed to fulfil their public service role and to an extent did just the opposite, providing sensationalistic stories, favouring particular sources (mainly official ones, from one political faction or one ethno-national group), sometimes accentuating security threats and possible conflicts, or simply by failing to provide relevant information or in-depth analysis necessary for substantive understanding of related public interest issues.

In this research we start from the assumption that weaknesses of the media sector manifest themselves with particular severity in crisis situations. We also recognize the pivotal role of media in what the dominant framing of the crises is, by which they can contribute to, or thwart, democratic communication. The experience of media in former Yugoslavia in the 1990 is a reminder of how devastating the consequences can be.

1.1. About this research

The research was conducted in six countries of the region: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro. In each country the researcher focuses on one particular case of crisis. The selected cases of crisis range from political issues that involved strong ethno-national sentiments (in BiH, Serbia and Kosovo), clashes between government and opposition (in Montenegro), citizen protest accompanied with the political fight between ruling party and opposition (in Albania) and finally a local turn of the international refugee crisis (in Macedonia). The authors analyse patterns of media reporting and possible determinant factors, and provide recommendations on how to advance media performance in crisis situations.

The span of crisis situations in the region defies the standard focus on the emergency situations such as natural disasters, violent attacks or wars. In fact, here we understand crisis situations as much wider phenomena, including different issues that involve controversies and confrontation between major societal actors, ranging from a constitutional or crisis in forming the government, through a crisis manifested in the course of citizen protests to a crisis in thinking and decision-making with regards to how refugees are dealt with. The following cases were analysed:

- **Protests concerning Grand Park in Tirana, or the so-called Lake Park protests**, which started in February 2016, against building a children playground in the area of Lake Park in Tirana, which was seen by protesters as part of a dramatic urbanization through which public spaces and green areas across the country are being destroyed ***(Country report author: Ilda Londo)***.
- Events concerning **National Day of Republika Srpska (RS) in Bosnia and Herzegovina**; the polarization between Bosniaks and Serbs was intensified when RS authorities acted directly against the ruling of the Constitutional Court of BiH (that the date of celebration of

Day of RS is unconstitutional and discriminatory) and organized a related referendum on 25 September 2016, the results of which go against the court decision (*Country report author: Lidija Pisker*).

- Crisis in **relations between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo**, triggered by the **building of a wall in the divided city of Mitrovica** at the end of 2016. Presented as a part of revitalization of a bridge that divides the two communities, or as a part of secessionist Serb policies in northern Kosovo, it was one of the events that set back the ongoing negotiations between Pristina and Belgrade at the end of 2016 and beginning of 2017 (*Country report author: Isuf Berisha*).
- **Refugee crisis in Macedonia**, dealing with the transit of over 700,000 refugees going from Greece to Western Europe. Deaths of refugees, their illegal detention, threatening them as witnesses for criminal proceedings against smugglers, clashes between refugees and police at the border, closing the border in March 2016 were some of the issues on which government actions were praised by pro-government media and criticized by other outlets. The refugee crises coincided with a political crisis in the country, something that further polarized the media (*Country report author: Marina Tuneva*).
- Crisis of **relations between Serbia and Croatia** that culminated when Zagreb expressed its objections on issues related to education of Croatian minority in Serbia and subsequently blocked the opening of Chapter 26 of Serbia EU accession talks. (*Country report author: Jovanka Matić*).
- Crises pertaining to **state coup in Montenegro**, claimed to be prevented by state authorities. The crisis emerged in the course of the October 2016 general elections, adding fuel to the already inflammatory political rhetoric. Two opposite interpretations of the alleged coup – one portraying it as an act of terrorism and the other as a government hoax—dominated the media coverage. (*Country report author: Danijela Vukčević*)

Based on a sample of media content, each author analysed frames in which the crisis was presented and how the media employed some of the professional standards. Insights from interviews with several respondents in each country complement the results of the content analysis. The methodological framework was designed to explore the ideological background of media reporting, as well as how journalistic norms played out in the course of the crisis.

The ideological background is analysed based on **frame analysis**, relying on the understanding of the critical role of the media in shaping dominant interpretations, i.e. the dominant frames¹ in a society. Framing affects the way the reality is perceived and it also influences people's behaviours.² Media framing often reflects the power relations and rely on

¹ Frames are understood as classification, organization and interpretation of life experiences in order to make a sense out of them (Goffman 1974) and to evoke particular realities out of the "kaleidoscope of potential realities" (Edelman 1993: 232)

² Benford and Snow (2000) believe for example that framing affects recruitment, mobilisation, and readiness for action. Edelman (1993) suggests that the elements that are highlighted in media coverage of a social movement

the dominant framing in particular society, and the secondary sources above all emphasize the role of elite sources in how the events are framed (see Entman and Rojecki 1993). Other sources, however, put more emphasis on transformative potentials in framing processes and interaction in the construction of meaning.³ In this research we recognize both – the potential constructive and destructive role of the media in how a crisis is understood, social polarization in SEE countries heightened or challenged, and in the long run, how the crisis is aggravated or dissolved. Frame analysis employed in this research is based on a theoretical understanding of framing as a process that involves diagnosing on the one hand and commending particular solutions on the other (Gamson, 1992; Entman 1993; Verloo 2005). Thus, the analysis is focused on: a) how the problem is diagnosed (what is understood as a main problem) and b) how the prognosis/solution of that problem is presented in media content.

Additional **analysis of journalistic norms** focuses on the following questions: did the media present the wider context; was some information missing; did the media use diverse sources and present different aspects of the controversy; was there a visible siding with a particular group; and finally were there examples of sensationalism, discriminatory reporting or hate speech in the analysed media sample. The scope of research is limited and the results only indicate some of the patterns of media reporting, while further research is needed for more encompassing conclusions.

Case studies revolve around very different types of crisis and thus no common analytical framework was employed in the six country reports. Instead, in this regional report we will first shortly outline the recent crises in the six countries in the region, present the main findings on how the media communicated the crises (Chapter 2), and then discuss the main findings through the prism of professional standards and norms, the capacities of media outlets in the region to report on crises, as well as historical experiences that determine such capacities (Chapter 3). The findings are summarized in the conclusions, while the appendix offers joint recommendations based on all country reports.

The research was conducted between November 2016 and May 2017.

1.2. Frequent crises as particular challenge for media integrity

Media in the SEE region are frequently faced with challenges of reporting on complex issues in the course of crises that involve strong controversies and in which the interest of the ruling political parties and affiliated groups are invested. Crises often lead to a complete political deadlock, with Macedonia being the most extreme example, as one upon another crisis piled up since the wiretapping scandal of 2015, revealing electoral fraud, corruption and patterns of media control. Mass protests followed, leading to early parliamentary elections at the end of

will be critical for the movement's ability to influence public opinion and policy. Similarly, the main framing of election campaigns influences people's choices in elections.

³ See for example Johnston and Klandermans, 1995, Livingstone 1990, Tarrow, 2011.

2016. It then took Macedonia nearly six months to get a new government, with the president, a loyalist of the then-ruling VMRO-DPMNE party refusing to hand the mandate to the leader of the opposition on grounds that to do so would threaten the country's sovereignty. The crisis triggered a series of street protests and violence.

The inter-ethnic and inter-state relations in the region have clearly been worsening in 2015 and 2016, including those between Serbia and Croatia, as well as between Serbia and Kosovo. Series of events, including the building of a wall in Mitrovica, the arrest of the Kosovo's prime minister, and finally a train decorated with slogans "Kosovo is Serbia" sent towards Kosovo borders from Serbia resulted in a major setback in the EU-sponsored dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia on normalisation of relations. Similarly, the war of words between Croatian and Serbian officials escalated on a number of occasions⁴, as Matić notes, tends to intensify during election campaigns in both countries. Kosovo is also experiencing the rise of anti-establishment sentiments, with a growing dissatisfaction of citizens and rising popularity of anti-establishment movement Vetvendosje (Self-determination).

The state-building process in BiH has been hindered by numerous unresolved issues, which often revolve around interethnic relations. The country struggles with numerous problems including those related to its constitutional order, authority of state institutions, secessionist politics of the ruling party in the Serb-majority entity Republika Srpska, frequent dissolutions of government coalitions, or widespread corruption. In such circumstances, as noted by Lidija Pisker, the author of country report on Bosnia and Herzegovina, many socio-political issues are easily elevated to the level of crisis.

The crises in Montenegro have also intensified in recent years, with the anti-government protests being staged during 2015 and beginning of 2016, targeted against government corruption, and including demands for resignation of the long-time Prime Minister and demanding free and fair elections. The ruling coalition split at the beginning of 2016, resulting in a government crisis. The alleged coup in October 2016 triggered the biggest crisis since the 2006 referendum on independence, fortifying political divisions along opposite interpretations of the alleged coup.

Whether fabricated or aggravated by political elites, crises more often than not present them with opportunities to consolidate power and pacify the electorate.

Albania somewhat differs from this pattern of heightened controversies, with occasional citizen protests (organized by civil society, particular interest groups or by political parties) raising controversies by pointing to particular human rights or economic issues, and involving some critique of the government actions and/or political clashes. One of such protests against corruption and for free elections, organized by the opposition, emerged at the moment of writing of this report⁵.

⁴ See for example article published by Center for European Policy Analysis, available here: <http://cepa.org/Croatia-Serbia-conflict-revived#>

⁵ See more in an article at Deutsche Welle website, here: <http://www.dw.com/en/albania-opposition-protests-for-free-elections-and-end-to-corruption/a-37619901>.

2. Media reporting on crisis situations in six SEE Countries: business as usual

The conclusions from all reports indicate that media reporting in crisis situations does not dissent from its standard patterns. Overall, media seem to largely underperform in terms of public interest and respect for journalistic norms. The way that media frame the crisis situations shows worrying tendency of (often selective) representation of opposing views about the crisis. In general, violations of **journalistic norms** the authors found in this research are a lack of differentiation between facts, assumptions and opinions, lack of checking of information provided by singular, often anonymous, sources, lack of pluralism of sources and perspectives, with official sources often prioritised, and finally a lack of clarification of context and information necessary for citizens to form an informed opinion about the crisis.

2.1. Missing information and lack of in-depth reporting

Missing information and the lack of clarifications about some of the issues key for understanding of a crisis situation is the most common problem of media reporting in all analysed cases of crisis.

Media reporting seems to be focused more on events, neglecting the processes and context in which the crises unfold. Secondary sources point to such tendency of the media to focus on events.⁶ Reporting on Lake Park protests in Albania does not depart from such patterns - reporting was mainly missing elaboration of the government's actions and related legal issues, as well as elaboration of protesters' views and demands, while it particularly focused on street demonstrations and protest violence.

In this way, major issues of public interests were sometimes largely neglected. Media oriented dominantly towards Bosniak community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, did not elaborate on the often emphatically presented implications of the referendum for the state constitution, while the reports of Serb-oriented media in particular fail to point out, let alone discuss, the obvious discriminatory nature of the date chosen as the Day of RS. Focused instead on what is presented as irreconcilable ethno-national interests, media likely contributed to the polarisation of society and an atmosphere of anxiety.

Similarly, the analysed content of Montenegrin media did not shed light on the basic facts concerning the alleged coup, such as the issue of why and where the weapons confiscated during the state actions were (reportedly) dismantled and tossed away. Accuracy was sometimes sacrificed to a desire to come up with exclusive reporting, with the public service broadcaster TVCG1 reporting at one point that an accused coup plotter had signed a plea agreement, which soon turned out not to be the case—what's more, the law doesn't even allow plea bargaining for the specific charges the person faced.

⁶ See for example McChesney 2008; McCurdy 2010.

Reports on refugee crisis in Macedonia lacked references to push factors for movements of refugees, analysis of government actions, as well as personal angles from the perspective of refugees that would sensitize the citizens to the impact of this geopolitical development and national policies on the lives of those directly affected.

In the course of the crisis between Serbia and Croatia, important information was seemingly tendentiously omitted to fit to the frame of antagonistic relations between the two countries. Namely, Croatia was singled out although Bulgaria expressed similar reservations in the context of Serbia's EU accession talks. Some reports did not clearly present the signing of the agreement with national minorities as the reason for Croatia to lift the blockade of the talks. Important issues of public interest pertaining to education of ethnic minorities in Serbia were barely covered, with reports failing to mention that progress on minority education was slow and partially made only in recent years.

In sum, the media did not seem to actively engage in making information relevant to the crisis more available to the public.

2.2. Favours particular sources and perspectives on crisis situations

The reporting on analysed cases of crisis lacks pluralism that would contribute to democratic communication in the course of a crisis. This was evident in selective presentation of particular views, relying on particular sources, the focus on particular perspectives, while neglecting others.

Lidija Pisker, for example, concludes that selection of views on the referendum crisis was dependent on the ethnicity the media outlet "belongs" to. The media showed clear siding in providing more space for one interpretation of the crisis than another. Given that Croat national interests were not directly "invested" in this particular case, however, there was no detectable siding in the reports of the "Croat media."

Relying on singular sources of information and thus more emphasis on interpretation of only one side of inter-ethnic confrontation is noted in the Kosovo report. Isuf Berisha notes that official stance of Serbia is accentuated by the Serbian-language media, while most Albanian-language media favoured the opposition in Kosovo. Similar tendency of relying on unidentified sources, often of questionable credibility, was noted in the report on crisis reporting in Montenegro. As indicated by Danijela Vukčević, media siding with particular interpretation of the alleged coup largely corresponded with its existing general position toward the government.

A tendency of pro-government media to focus more on national security, compared to media critical of the government that tends to report more on the conditions for refugees at the border and shelter centres, is indicated in the country report on crisis reporting in Macedonia. Voices from the opposition were often omitted, and Marina Tuneva notes that pro-government media seem to show such tendency more frequently.

A lack of dissenting voices was noted also in Serbia, in particular among the analysed tabloid

and semi-tabloid media, which mainly voiced opinions of political officials in Serbia, blaming Croatia for the blockade of the accession talks. The Croat minority was rarely given a voice. In one tabloid report a questionable source was selected, seemingly tendentiously, as its take was in line with the dominant critique towards the actions of the Croatian government. Serbian officials were generally provided with more media space than Croatian ones, and the voices of Serbian „side“ that were departing from the critique of Croatian government were missing. In this way, notes Jovanka Matić, most of the media sided with the government views, while one of the analysed outlets criticised the actions of the government and addressed ambiguousness of Serbia in relations towards the EU and Russia.

Country researchers, and in some cases interviewees, indicate that there were positive exceptions in terms of diversity of perspectives and voices. In BiH, some websites and the state-level Public Service Broadcasters were mentioned, and in Kosovo the daily Koha Ditore. Media coverage of Lake Park protests in Albania altogether seems to constitute an exception, since the analysed media content does not indicate a particular bias. However, even in Albania, voices of civil society were largely neglected, which was a tendency noted by some of the other authors as well. Voices of citizens, experts, refugees, or international human-rights organizations were, for example, identified as relevant, but were largely ignored.

2.3. Political officials as the most dominant voices

Official sources are the most dominant in the news coverage of crises, suggest the findings in each of the analysed cases of crisis reporting. In Albania, for example, political actors frame the problem in 70 percent of cases, with government being the leading source, but the opposition being fairly presented as well. Thus, legitimate citizen demands were largely overshadowed by political conflicts between the government and the opposition. Such finding is indicative of the monopolisation of the public communication by political elites even in cases where citizen discontent is the central component of the particular crisis. Similarly indicative is the finding that conditions of refugees in Macedonia were also dominantly referred to by officials, rather than civil society actors. In this way, alternative perspectives on the crisis were potentially omitted.

In a similar way, political voices not only dominated the communication about the referendum crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina or the crisis in relations of Kosovo with Serbia, but a critical review was missing and the framing—often putting emphasis on the conflict—was uncritically transmitted. The media largely failed even to simply check the most inflammatory claims of the officials. A daily in Kosovo provided a positive example when asking for evidence for the claims that Serbia is arming Serbs in northern Kosovo. Even though the question was not answered by institutions, the media distanced itself from the unchecked claims and in a way relativized the claims and accentuated that they are not confirmed.

In this way, media are acting more like megaphones of political elites, reproducing the dominant ideologies, and sometimes working in favour of particular political camps.

2.4. Sensationalism and indirect discrimination, rather than hate speech⁷

Researchers did not find examples of hate speech in the analysed samples, which suggests the mainstream media have adopted the basic principles of political correctness. In most of the analysed cases, openly discriminatory speech was not detected either, though one author finds examples of the use of politically incorrect signifier for ethnic Albanians (“Šiptari”) in a report of a Serbian tabloid. In Macedonia, Marija Tuneva argues, media reporting involved some confusion between the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘migrants’, but did not reflect xenophobic sentiments.

But even without discriminatory language, two authors find that through the failure to substantially include the views of representatives of the “other” group the **media act in a discriminatory way**. Jovanka Matić notes that in the accentuated distinction between the righteous “us” and the hostile “them” stereotypes of Croatia’s anti-Serb stance were promoted. Similar in kind is the failure to adequately present the views and interests of the ethno-national “other” in the case of the referendum crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Both cases involved important human rights issues that were neglected. The status of a national minority in Serbia was neglected in media reports, while media outlets from Republika Srpska utterly neglected the arguments about the discriminatory nature of the date chosen as the Day of RS.

Sensationalism was not common to all countries, but some of the authors found indicative examples. Sensationalism, rather than fact-checking of alarming information, was detected in a number of analysed reports in Kosovo and BiH. The newspaper headline “Serbian media instigate situation: Serbian gendarmerie is ready to intervene in Mitrovica” is, for example, judged as sensationalistic since it accentuates the possibility of armed conflict. In BiH as well in a few examples the inflammatory claims about possible preparations for violence and armed conflict were not fact-checked, and were even accentuated in a sensationalistic manner. Such tendency of sensationalism that contribute to militarization of the discourse on the crisis is particularly worrying. Statements of political officials, or in some cases former army officials or religious leaders, which were heavily reported by the media, included a tendency of evocating the war past and proclaim readiness for “defence” from those portrayed as long-time adversaries.

The elements of sensationalist reporting that Jovanka Matić identifies in the tabloid media

⁷ Term hate speech refers to “all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin” (Appendix to Recommendation No. R (97) 20, Council of Europe, 1997). Although somewhat inaccurately, here I use the term “indirect discrimination” to delineate practices that do not include speech in which above-listed categories are directly discriminated against (claims of their inferiority or similar), and do not necessarily include the intent to discriminate, but nevertheless lead to different presentation (or more so under-representation) of the particular group compared to others. Finally, sensationalism is in short understood as reporting that accentuates trivialities, emotional impressions and/or manipulate/distort facts (for more on sensationalism see for example Grabe et al, 2010)

reports in Serbia are colloquial language, frequent exclamation marks, emotional charge, accentuating antagonism, conflict and even violence in relations between Croatia and Serbia. A focus on personal life and vocation combined with trivial claims that the accused are not capacitated for a coup were noted in the crisis reporting in Montenegro.

2.5. Strong polarisation and/or superficial framing of events

Media framing in majority of analysed reports go in line with strong polarisation on ethnic and political grounds, with one or another framing being accentuated by particular media. Reporting rarely went beyond the antagonistic presentation of seemingly irreconcilable views.

Table 1: Dominant frames: diagnosis and prognosis

	Major frame I	Major frame II
Bosnia and Herzegovina:	<p>Diagnosis/problem: Referendum (anti-constitutional, costly, worsening interethnic relations) Responsible: Serb politicians</p> <p>Prognosis/solution: preventing or penalizing referendum Responsible: international community</p>	<p>Diagnosis/problem: Opposition to referendum (referendum as a paradigm of democracy and guarantee of integrity of RS) Responsible: Bosniak politicians and international community</p> <p>Prognosis/solution: Defending referendum and RS (Responsible: RS authorities)</p>
Kosovo	<p>Diagnosis/problem: tensions raised by Kosovar Albanians (inciting conflict, Albanians want war) Responsible: Kosovar Albanians</p> <p>Prognosis/solution: Wall should be protected, Pristina is sending special unit and instigating war, decreasing tensions and peace as solution, or armed protection of Serbs if needed Responsible: Albanians should stay calm, Serbia will protect Serbs, EU should react</p>	<p>Diagnosis/problem: a) Wall is a part of problematic Serb politics b) Wall as a result of bad governance in Kosovo (separatist move, illegal, part of secret agreement) Responsible: a) Serbs and Serbia b) both Serbs and Kosovo government</p> <p>Prognosis/solution: taking the wall down as part of a solution, arming Serbs in north as a threat, Albanians and Serbs should stay calm Responsible: authorities should take the wall down, hope for actions of NATO and EU</p>
Macedonia	<p>Diagnosis/problem: bad conditions of refugees as humanitarian problem Responsible: partly local government</p> <p>Prognosis/solution: a) Government already took the needed actions; b) government should take actions; c) international community rather than government should take actions Responsible: a) government; b) international community</p>	<p>Diagnosis/problem: arrival of refugees as a problem for Macedonia (because of possible security threats and the financial costs) Responsible: Greece and EU are partly responsible</p> <p>Prognosis/solution: Government took the needed actions; help of EU is needed Responsible: EU</p>
Serbia	<p>Diagnosis/problem: Stalling of the</p>	<p>Diagnosis/problem: Failure of Serbia's</p>

	<p>accession talks by Croatia as a political move: a) by Croatia which aims at slowing down accession and humiliating Serbia b) in the name of the West Responsible: a) Croatia b) Croatia and the West</p> <p>Prognosis/Solution: a) removing the blockade b) military solution Responsible: a) EU b) Russia and Serbia</p>	<p>government to prevent the drawback of the accession talks (by assuring better education conditions for minorities) Responsible: the government</p> <p>Prognosis/solution: removing the blockade Responsible: Germany, to put pressure on Croatia</p>
Montenegro	<p>Diagnosis/problem: attempt of terrorist attack, arrest and murder of Prime Minister Responsible: group of Serbian Citizens, opposition in Montenegro, some media, businessman Miodrag Davidovic</p> <p>Prognosis/Solution: not specified, but implicitly measures to sanction terrorists Responsible: not specified or implied</p>	<p>Diagnosis/problem: The coup is a hoax by the ruling party meant to influence elections Responsible: The prosecution office and its affiliates, ruling party</p> <p>Prognosis/solution: not specified, but implicitly measures to counter the hoax Responsible: not specified or implied</p>

Note: The frames presented here are not exhaustive; for the detailed presentation of all frames, please see the country reports.

In Kosovo, Albanian language media presented the problem more in the Frame I - wall as a problem, while Serb language media were more focused on the Frame II – tensions raised by Albanians. In case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, media oriented towards Bosniak community presented referendum as the main problem, and those oriented to Serb community presented the opposition to referendum as a problem, while the reports of the media affiliated with the Croat community were found to be somewhat less dramatic in the presentation of antagonistic views, but still did not offer analysis or additional information that would contribute to the communication during the crisis. As noted before, both Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina the framing involved strong references to possible militarisation of the conflict.

In Serbia, crisis is mainly presented in the frame articulated by the Serbian officials, where Croatia was portrayed mainly as an adversary that intentionally and without a reason stalls Serbia on the EU accession path. Only one of the analysed media outlets also presented another problem – the failure of Serbian Government to amend the strategic documents with activities on education rights of minorities. But even then the problem was viewed from the human rights perspective and frame of minorities rights, but rather in a frame of political pragmatism in which government was criticised and the opposition somewhat complimented (for its suggestions to amend the strategic documents). The human rights frame was present only in reports of one media outlet after the agreement with national minorities was signed.

As noted earlier, media framing of the refugee crisis differed as either security (mainly in pro-government media) or the humanitarian frame (mainly in media critical of the government) was accentuated. In Montenegro, the pro-government media seem to have diagnosed the problem as an attempted coup, while the media critical of the government showed scepticism towards such framing by the officials, and in some cases presented a completely opposite

framing – that the coup was only a hoax by the ruling party.

The crisis case in Albania also shows opposite framing, yet with sharp polarisation of media frames. However, dominance of the frame of public order, with reports focusing on the violence by protesters and destruction of public property, left little scope for focussing on issues of public interest, such as environmental implications, transparency and legality of government actions.

3. Professional ideologies and the historical capacities of media in SEE to report on crises: discussion of the research results

The ideal-typical values of journalistic profession are put to an ultimate test in the context of crisis situations. The above-presented results indicate that the media in the region passed the test poorly. A look at the determining factors shows that media are not capacitated for quality reporting. Political and corporate capture of the media, the organizational and financial constraints in newsrooms, and (lack of) sensibility towards the political other, are all likely to have diminished the performance of media in the analysed cases of crisis reporting. A number of authors in this volume point to what they called a “**crisis of journalism**” (see Pisker, Tuneva) or “**media crisis**” (Matić) in their respective countries, terms that were also previously used⁸ and seem to be indicative of the notion that the flaws of journalism are not viewed as a deviation anymore, but that they have become a norm.

3.1. The capacities for crisis reporting from the historical perspective

Capacitating of media in the region for quality reporting on crisis situations should be viewed in a historical perspective. In the process of transition the media sector was not empowered for quality reporting in general, and relatedly, media are still entangled in the ethno-national divides. The capacities of media for quality reporting on crisis situations are particularly affected.

3.1.1. Inter-ethnic differentiation still plagues the media

In the context of ex-Yugoslav states, the ethno-national differentiation continues to dominate all spheres of life, including the media. The current stance on the wars of the 1990s and towards the role of the media during the wars continues to determine capacities of media to tackle sensitive inter-state and inter-ethnic issues. There is a wide consensus that journalists and media played a pivotal role in preparing the ground for war and inciting war crimes. The media were engaged as part of a strategy of reinforcing ethno-national identities and differences.⁹ As Kurspahić notes, the media were “degraded to instruments for producing

⁸ See for example Manifesto of the SEE Media Observatory partnership, available here: http://mediaobservatory.net/sites/default/files/Towards%20Media%20Policy%20in%20the%20Service%20of%20the%20Public_0.pdf.

⁹ See for example Thompson 1994, Kurspahić 2003, Volčić i Džihana 2011.

enemies, inciting war and justifying war crimes,” while the rare media and journalists that stood in defence of journalistic values often paid a high price (2003: 13). But what makes this highly relevant even today is that in the postwar period the media sector did not clearly distance itself from the troublesome past. The public condemnation for the atrocious role of the media and journalists that put themselves in the service of ethno-national politics and that incited to war, is still not clear and uniform.¹⁰ The education system and journalist community have done little, if anything, to come to terms with the past. Legacy of the nationalistic logic in the media of ex-Yugoslav states is best manifested in the failure of a majority of mainstream media to provide well founded journalistic reports on particular war crimes and events, with the same cases being disproportionately covered and interpreted in vastly a different manner by media operating on different sides of ethno-national divides. Reports on war crimes, commemorations and trials display strong ethno-national siding¹¹ (see Malović, 2008; Džihana and Volčić, 2011). Journalist and media analyst Boro Kontić believes that this is a clear “recidivism of the bad war journalism” by which journalists are failing to take responsibility for their profession.¹² Moreover, the differing ethnic truths about the past, largely (re)produced by the media, hinder the process of reconciliation in the region.

Kurspahić’s statement that most of the media “remain in the tranches of nationalism, in whose creation they had played the infamous leading role” (2003: 11) still holds true. Just as the national elites in the nineties could not have been as influential without the support of the media (Van Dijk, 1993: 241), media continue to play a central role in maintaining the dominance of ethno-national ideology and in construction of ethno-national identities¹³. Media has also functioned as a ground for the legitimization of the power of the nationalist elites in the ex-Yugoslav countries ever since. Not only reporting on war, but reporting on nearly every socio-political issue in former Yugoslav countries, in which interests of political elites are invested, still strongly relies on ethno-national differentiations and polarization.

Pursuit of solutions missing

In cases analysed in this research, three of which were revolving around inter-ethnic relations, media reproduced the ethnic differentiation and thus set the ground for intensification of conflict, while possible **solutions** for the crisis were not substantially explored. Solutions or prognoses of the crisis were rarely mentioned explicitly, but they were somewhat implied – mainly from the perspective of key sources - in the way the problems are framed. But, as shown in the Table 2 (above), the (mainly implied) “solutions” were also presented in opposing and irreconcilable frames. In cases involving the strongest ethno-national conflicts the implied solutions were either stopping the referendum or assuring it and defending RS (in BiH), either protecting or taking the wall down (in Kosovo). In both

¹⁰ See for example article by Radio Free Europe, available at: <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/719821.html>.

¹¹ Also see Malović, Stjepan, article published in 2008. On war propaganda in Serbian media see Vekarić, 2011.

¹² Matejčić, B, interview with Boro Kontić, 2011. Also see interview of MC online with Nenad Pejić, 2013.

¹³ See for example Anderson 1993.

cases, even the claims about likelihood of resorting to arms were uncritically transmitted by the media.

In this way, the media did not act in a manner that can contribute to conflict resolutions. Standard journalistic values were not exercised in a manner that would assure media are not aggravating the crisis. In societies burdened with divides and conflicts, one can argue, media have a particular responsibility to develop sensibilities for the “other”, which has become imperative in democratic multicultural societies in general¹⁴. Along this line, instead of sticking to the principle of objectivity and balance in which journalists are simply “getting both sides of the story”, the journalistic ideal should go in favour of “more complex or multi-perspectival reading of events” (Deuze, 2005a: 456)¹⁵. As such sensibilities were not systematically promoted by the education institutions and the professional communities in the region, it comes as no surprise that the media in ex-Yugoslavia are often not capacitated to completely depart from “patriotic” reporting for “our” group, and to offer complex readings of the events.

Apart from cases of crises burdened with the strong ethno-national identification, media also did not substantially address possible solutions in other cases of crisis either. Some solutions that were implied were only partial, dependent on where the main sources come from, without analysis, information that clarify and put the issue in context. In case of Serbia, removing the blockade of the accession talks was univocally presented as a solution, while the improvement of education for national minorities was not discussed in this context. In Albania, construction of a park or on the other side stopping the construction were implied solutions, both based on claims of their benefits for the community.

3.1.2. Flawed transition, weak media sector, interference of centres of power

Some of the problems of media systems in the region are in part a product of the incomplete and flawed transition processes which never enabled free media. All countries included in this research experienced a relatively recent transition from autocratic systems and towards democratization of media sphere. Major steps in the change of media system involved privatization of state-held media, establishment of PSB systems and a regulatory body for audio-visual sector, setting up of basic journalistic norms (which somewhat toned down communication after the wars), setting up legal guaranties for free expression and free access to information, etc. But success has been very limited. Underdeveloped media policies did not enable substantial media freedom and financial sustainability, but were rather conducive to instrumentalisation of media for particular political and economic interests. Privatization in some of the countries was conducted only in part and/or it is considered problematic. PSBs

¹⁴ Western societies are also experiencing similar challenges related to multiculturalism (Deuze 2005). Multicultural citizenship has become one of the central issues in today’s socio-political formation of society (Kymlicka, 1995).

¹⁵ Another frequently mentioned contemporary challenge to media ideologies comes from the new technologies and changing nature of communication, with the role of media organisations in reporting and sharing information has been overlapping with the increasing role of citizen in the communication processes. This aspect is however not in the focus of our research.

are largely dysfunctional and put in the service of ruling political parties. Legislation on free access to information is often disregarded with impunity. Self-regulatory systems are still weak (or in the case of Albania non-existent). Journalistic norms and media institutions helped to minimize violations of basic journalistic norms, but were not enough to significantly improve the overall quality of journalism.

After decades of transition, the states of the region are still weak, heavily relying on the media to assert their power. Interference with media independence by political actors never truly diminished, but mechanisms of control somewhat changed. Transfer of media ownership from state to public and private and deregulation of the sector were followed with patterns of ownership and financing instrumentalised for particular goals. With diminishing revenues, the state has been one of the main sources of funding for the media - through subsidies and advertising - and influence on editorial policies of media across the region is considered high.

Under such circumstances, there are a number of constraints that limit the capacities of the media for quality reporting during crisis situations, some of which will be outlined in the next subsections.

3.1.3 Strong political parallelism

The depiction of media systems and socio-political circumstances by the six authors in this volume is mainly in line with the category of polarized pluralist model of media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), characterized by strong **political parallelism** and what they identified as stronger persistence of advocacy journalism (2004: 73). The stronger the political parallelism is “the culture and discursive style of journalism is closely related to that of politics” (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 29). The above-presented polarisation in how the crises were framed, selective presentation of sources and perspectives, but also the superficial reporting that does not include fact-checking and presentation of contest all speak of political parallelism.

A patrocratic government makes sure the media are primarily made subservient to the ruling party. The majority of media in Serbia, as the most uniform example, more or less support the ruling party and in particular the former Prime minister and newly elected president, Aleksandar Vučić. Similarly, the government is considered the most influential in the other countries of the region, though the grip over media in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not as uniform as it is shared between different administrative levels and different ethno-national camps. Private media act primarily as platform for particular political or business agendas,¹⁶ the non-profit, community sector is underdeveloped, and the public service broadcasters are hijacked from the public and put in the service of the ruling parties. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, two entity broadcasters are targets of capture by entity governments, while the state-level PSB has been abandoned by the state-level parliament as illustrated in the utter unwillingness to find a solution for its funding in order to prevent its possible shut-down.

In some of the countries, most evidently Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, political parallelism is reflected in a deep ethno-national fragmentation of the media community. This

¹⁶ See for example Kreho, 2012.

divide in Kosovo is reflected on the level of everyday production and media content, collective organising, the language divides between journalists, as well as security issues for journalists trying to work on “the other side.” Equally detrimental is the strong polarisation between pro-government and media critical of the government, most evident in Montenegro and Macedonia, which has only been cemented in the course of prolonged political crises. This divide in Montenegro also transpires in the existence of separate self-regulatory systems (more below).

Political control over media is sometimes direct, as showed in the wiretapping scandal in Macedonia. The recordings leaked in 2015 revealed close relationships between officials and pro-government media, but also corruption in the form of direct instructions by government officials on media content, politicians selecting journalists of public broadcasters or agreements about exclusive footage for particular media. But self-censorship is considered even more pervasive (see BIRN 2015 for survey in Albania). Lack of in-depth reporting and focus on trivialities has made journalism less politically relevant. Instead of acting upon state directives from the communist reign, media now play the role in manipulations which, as Ivančić for example argues, consist in “producing” the appearance of the rule of law (where there is none in reality) through media reports on petty corruption - often presented in an entertaining format - that are created precisely in order to conceal the failures of the government and major advertisers (Ivančić, 2009: 20- 23). In this light, crisis situations are part of such spectacles that cover up the persistent economic and political problems in the region. Both Pisker and Matić (in this research) argue that the crisis situations and political clashes, whether real, down-played, overblown or created, are used as a tool for legitimizing the power of the ruling group. More specifically, strong polarization between ethnic Serbs and Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina legitimizes the nationalist politics in both ethnic camps, similarly as the polarization between the government and those portrayed as the foreign agents and traitors (as in the analysed case of crisis in Macedonia and Montenegro) also triggers the mechanisms of national defence which are important for maintaining political power. It is also significant that a number of the analysed crises evolved in the midst of the election period (Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia, BiH), and as in the case of Montenegro very likely influenced the election results, possibly through the increased turnout, which helped the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS).

In the cases included in this research, raising tensions between the ethnic and/or political “us” and “them” is the essence of the political discourse, which media often readily took on. In this way media are reproducing the exclusive dominant ideologies, serving particular political interests, and actually contribute to the socio-political crises. With media failing to clarify the context and expert issues, simply disseminating extremely opposite interpretations of the same issues, without fact-checking, the audience is left with one or more unrevised, unverified and partial “truths”.

3.1.3. Economic and organizational constraints

Ownership and funding patterns grounded in close relations between the media and political and economic elites are fundamentals on which political parallelism is built and are the main

factors that hinder media performance. Media markets in the region are poor, and some argue that markets do not exist in the true sense of the word, but rather that “media market is merely a euphemism for state-oriented advertising” (Bašić Hrvatinić and Petković, 2016). Indeed, state is one of the most dominant sources of revenue, providing funding for media, through subsidies and state-related advertising. In Macedonia, for example, government funding is assessed as the single largest source of funding for the media, and in other countries of the region one of the largest ones as well.

The central problem is that the available sources of funding are so limited that government funding is almost necessary to sustain any media business. The lack of legitimate criteria and transparency of such funding has led analysts to conclude that public funds in these relations were, in fact, privatized. The fact is that a large number of media outlets survive in the poor media markets (see Table 2). Some corruptive patterns, that extend to relations between the media and commercial entities as well, are mentioned by Ilda Londo: “*both commercial advertising and public funds have been used to advertise...or to organise campaigns that have benefited media owners, whose editorial policy is in line with the government or commercial companies*”.

International donors are another major source of funding, but their involvement has decreased in the last decade. Professional communities do not provide key prerequisites that would attract major international advertiser. Audience research data is scarce, its reliability is questioned, the transparency of advertising practices limited and the international advertisers in some of the countries can easily reach the local audience through international and/or media from neighbouring countries.

Interests of media owners and those that provide funding prevail over professionalism. The more the topic tackles vested political and economic interests, the less likely it is that professional standards will be maintained.

Table 2. Overall market revenues and number of media

	Advertising revenues	No of media
Albania	38 million Euro (Est for 2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 69 TV stations (out of which two national) ● 69 radio stations (out of which two national) ● public radio and its local offices in major cities ● 113 cable providers and cable channels, five satellite TVs, five national terrestrial multiplexes ● 20 dailies ● possibly 650 online sources
Bosnia and Herzegovina	20 million Euro (EST for 2016) ¹⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 43 TV stations ● 139 radio stations ● 3 PSBs (TV plus radio) ● 52 broadcasters (in “other” networks¹⁸)

¹⁷ Estimations of advertising agency Fabrika. Note: *Government advertising and subsidies amount to 15 million Euro (EST)*

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 9 dailies and 189 periodicals ● hundreds of online sources
Kosovo	30 million Euro (EST from 2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 20 TV broadcasters (18 private, one NGO, one PSB) ● 83 radio broadcasters (63 private, 18 NGO, two PSB) ● 48 cable TV channels ● 5 dailies ● hundreds of online sources
Macedonia	40 million Euro (EST)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 63 TV stations ● 73 radio stations ● PSB ● 9 dailies and multitude of magazines¹⁹ ● hundreds of online sources
Montenegro	More than 27 million Euro ²⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 18 TV stations ● 57 radio stations ● 5 dailies, 3 weeklies, 30 monthlies ● 8 cable operators²¹ ● Hundreds of online sources

Source: data taken from the six country reports, unless indicated differently

Some secondary sources also put emphasis on the resources and organizational constraints within newsrooms, viewed as key determinants of reporting quality. Schudson, for example, notes that much of the work of the media is about reflecting on things that happen in the world, and that the reports depend on routine organization, as much as on the cultural tropes and narrative forms (2009).²²

Organisational constraints that limit professional integrity in SEE region are related to the simple fact that media resources are not tailored for good journalism. Many media lack human resources for quality coverage, in particular in remote areas. Journalists are often overburdened and deprived by media managers of opportunities for additional education. Editorial independence is constrained through appointments of editors “loyal” to the interests of the owners and their affiliates, and through a lack of support in cases when they defy those interests.

3.1.4. Lack of transparency of institutions

A lack of transparency of public institutions and their active communication with the public during a crisis is another important issue underlined by the authors. In Albania, for example,

¹⁸ The category of licences provided by Communications Regulatory Agency, the data available at: <http://rak.ba/eng/index.php?uid=1276851773>

¹⁹ Source: Export.gov, 2016, data available at: <https://www.export.gov/article?id=Macedonia-Trade-Promotion-and-Advertising>. Accessed 30 April 2017.

²⁰ Revenues of 5 biggest TV stations and 4 dailies is around € 27 Million, out of which € 15 Million from advertising; Source: Danijela Vukčević, report in this volume.

²¹ Source for all the numbers in this cell: MSI Irex report Montenegro 2017, available at: <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2017-montenegro.pdf>

²² In Sjoavaag, 2011.

the government did not sufficiently communicate about the Lake Park constructions. Similarly, the prosecutors failed to communicate timely and with sufficient information on the alleged coup in Montenegro. Access to official sources is even more complicated on issues involving inter-state relations. Isuf Berisha notes that during the “wall crisis” in Kosovo the European Union demonstrated a lack of openness in the first days of crisis, despite being alleged to have supported the construction. A timely communication from the EU would have helped clear the initial confusion.

Some country researchers even note a tendency for public institutions and political parties to offer ready-made stories, prepared by their PR offices, which the media then use in coverage of their activities. Or in somewhat less extreme but equally questionable practice, political actors engage mainly in one-sided communication, providing statements to and appearances in “friendly” media, which then deprives the media of opportunities to ask questions of public interest.

3.1.5. Professional integrity in crisis

Value systems underpinning professional journalism standards vary between different traditions, but in democratic societies the public service role of journalism appears as the master ideal of journalism profession globally²³. Other ideal-typical traits are mainly described in terms of objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, and a sense of ethics²⁴, and journalism is overall portrayed as one of the pillars of democratic societies. How these values translate in practice is determined by the dominant social factors²⁵, such as the above-described political parallelism, organisational constraints and dominant ideologies of ethno-national and political divides in the countries of SEE.

With regards to its ideological work, journalism has for a long time been simply presented as processes and products that support dominant ideologies²⁶, but many authors recognize journalism also as a platform for potential change²⁷. In the light of cultural studies, certain range of professional norms and ideologies, instead of wider societal norms, determine journalistic work, and it is in this range that the struggle for legitimacy between contending discourses occurs.²⁸ In this light, despite the existing constraints, the media and journalists also take an active part in (re)constructing the professional ideology and ways in which they exercise it in everyday journalistic practice. In the countries covered by this research,

²³ See for example Eide, 2007.

²⁴ Deuze, 2005: 446-447.

²⁵ Deuze for example argues that “one has to analyze and discuss the main attributes of such (potential) changes in order to successfully study, describe and explain contemporary journalism” (2005: 450). These factors may range “from routines of information gathering to recruitment patterns of journalists and shared ideological assumptions of the wider society” (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 26).

²⁶ See for example Schlesinger 1978, Hall, 1980, Gitling, 1980.

²⁷ See Altheide 1984; also see Hallin 1994.

²⁸ See Murdock and Golding 2005.

professional ethics codes have been developed (and to an extent adopted), but they only outline the threshold of acceptable journalism. At the same time, the highest values of journalism are rarely discussed and one can argue that the professional ideology remains under-articulated and under-promoted.²⁹ Media analysts repeatedly recognize the erosion of media integrity in the region, and recently a partnership of organizations from the region gathered through the SEE Media Observatory project urged for the media and journalism to be returned to public service³⁰. So far initiatives in support of such goals have been sporadic and unable to yield meaningful results. The journalistic community remains largely divided and unable to collectively organise to promote freedom from interference, better working conditions or a wider acceptance of the public service role of the media. On the contrary, in Montenegro, for instance, the community discussed its role during the coup crisis, but the discussion was far from being inclusive and it involved scapegoating of media and journalists as alleged supporters of terrorism, claims in favour of criminalisation of defamation or introducing licensing for different media, all of which would only further limit media freedom. The media in all countries fail to undertake a substantial self-reflection about the decay of media integrity, something that could potentially inform possible changes.

The authors in this volume, in fact, point to a scepticism³¹ within the journalistic community even towards attempts at self-regulation of breaches of basic journalistic norms. Judging by the testimonies obtained through available sources, journalists largely accept self-censorship as a professional necessity³². Some of the authors in this research note a lack of dedication to public interest and journalistic ethic on both individual and organizational level, not only as a consequence of the wider structural conditions, but equally as a factor in its own right that contributes to extensive commercialization and politicization of media content. Matić, in this volume, even notes that journalistic culture in Serbia includes equating public interests with the interests of political officials.

University education and short-term trainings insufficiently promote journalistic integrity

²⁹ Professional ideology in this sense is understood as the professional belief system or ideal of journalism. See Altschull 1990. On professional ideology among tabloid journalists see Deuze 2005.

³⁰ See Manifesto adopted at SEE Media Observatory final conference, available here: <http://mediaobservatory.net/radar/towards-media-policy-service-public>

³¹ Similar skepticism has been long articulated on the global level as well. For example, veteran BBC journalist John Simpson notes that the very word “duty” when talking about journalism sounds outdated. But nonetheless, Simpson considers it worthy to define duties of journalists and he proposes it should be to tell the people “as much, as widely, as deeply and as honestly as possible about what is going on in the world around them”, and to indicate why people should care about it. He leaves behind the notion of journalistic objectivity and points out that he himself often has in mind an aim that he seeks and the way to obtain it through his work. Simpson, John, *News From No Mans Land*, Pn: 2002.

Excerpts available at: <http://engageentertainenlighten.blogspot.si/p/fascinating-read-for-all-those.html>. Accessed 14 April 2017.

³² See BIRN 2015; Also, a respondent in the research on crisis in Montenegro mentioned a survey of Montenegrin Media Union which shows that 48 percent of journalists in Montenegro think that the ethics in journalism depends on the situation, that 30 percent said that they would pay for the confidential information and 11 percent would publish a story with an unconfirmed content” (Camovic, see country report on Montenegro).

and fail to sensitise journalists to adequately report on crisis situations. The authors in this research indicate that both the basic journalistic skills and particular skills for crisis reporting are insufficiently developed. Most notably, journalism education does not provide journalists with meaningful insights on the past and current conflicts in the region, and equips them poorly with skills needed to resist the official framing of events/processes and to question dominant ideologies³³. Reporting on conflict is not particularly addressed. Neither precautions for the media reporting to avoid aggravating the crisis nor the active pursuit of solutions in line with the concepts of peace journalism³⁴ are widely accepted by the journalistic community.

4. (Self-) regulation in the course of crisis

Regulation in audio-visual sector in most of the countries of the region is generally functional, which is mainly attributed to the fact that regulatory bodies have executive powers. However, the authors in this volume point to a lack of willingness and resources for regular monitoring of media content, and/or concerns about politicisation of these bodies (see reports on Macedonia and Serbia) which all limit the regulation and blemish the public image of regulators. The regulators did not register breaches of journalistic norms in the course of the analysed cases of crisis.

On the other hand, the power of self-regulation is still very limited in SEE. Lack of dedication of the professional community towards journalistic principles is indicated in the failure to establish a self-regulatory system in Albania and in other countries in the resistance of many online media to join self-regulatory systems and respect the decisions of self-regulatory bodies. In all the countries included in the research, except for Albania, a self-regulatory body has been established. And while their reach remains limited and they lack capacities for monitoring of media content, they bring indispensable contribution to promotion of ethical values. In some of the countries, Macedonia being one example, the number of audience complaints is increasing as is the membership of self-regulatory bodies. Overall, media outlets in the region rarely develop their internal systems for processing complaints from their readers, listeners and viewers.

There seems to be no special self-regulatory measures in crisis situations, except for issuing reminders about journalistic ethics in some countries. During the analysed crises, regulatory and self-regulatory bodies, as well as journalistic organizations in some of the countries, urged media to adhere to journalistic principles. Such actions were taken by all of these bodies in Bosnia and Herzegovina and by the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media

³³ Lynch and McGoldrick 2005, for example argue that journalist should be equipped with skills that can help in conflict resolutions.

³⁴ There are different concepts of peace journalism that propose journalists should analyze the conflict and tailor the journalistic work in pursue of its resolution. On the other side these concepts are criticized and instead following the good traditional journalistic values is recommended when covering conflicts and wars. See an overview of peace journalism concepts and its critiques in Zalčić and Džihana 2011. 25-30

Services in Macedonia. While these actions were important in terms of accentuating the relevance of ethical norms, some of the interviewees indicated that the impact of such actions was marginal.

In some of the countries, relevant self-regulatory bodies received complaints about media reports covering the analysed case of crisis. When judging media reports in which NGOs are accused of pressuring authorities in Macedonia to let refugees enter the country, the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM) found violations of ethical norms and called for information to be verified and for facts to be distinguished from opinion. Press Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina (PC) similarly found breaches in two media reports during the “referendum crisis,” but only one outlet removed the problematic content, while the other failed to do so. Resistance is particularly present among online media, which sometimes fail to provide even the basic information on owners, editors and contacts.

In some cases, decisions of self-regulatory bodies are also viewed as problematic. The implication for media freedoms are, for example, questionable with regard to the decision of Media Council for Self-Regulation in Montenegro, according to which a TV station violated ethical norms when a presenter failed to react to unverified claims about the prime minister made by an interviewee.

In Kosovo, some media outlets warned about media sensationalism and manipulation by political leaders, with notable columnists questioning the rhetoric of the officials, instead pointing out facts that suggested an actual decrease of animosities and unwillingness of ordinary people on either “sides” to start new conflicts.

(Self-)regulation in Albania is least developed. Self-regulatory mechanisms have never been established, while the Council of Complaints, a regulatory authority that processes complaints on content of audio-visual media, became functional only recently. It is a successor of the previous the Council of Ethics, which only had the power to issue statements, not to mediate between media outlets and the public. Londo indicates that scepticism of both journalistic community and citizens hinders regulation and that it will take time for the Council of Complaints to be sufficiently accepted.

Overall, while the regulation and self-regulation are important in sanctioning the journalistic lows in the course of crises, this research indicate that more should be done to promote the journalistic highest values. For example, while research on “Lake park” protests in Albania did not indicate breaches of basic journalistic standards, it also pointed to a lack of in-depth reporting guided by public interest.

5. Conclusions

In the course of frequent socio-political crises in SEE, the general weaknesses of the media sector manifests itself to the full. Judging by this small-scale research, media often fail to act in

the interest of the public, to perform a watchdog role, or to contribute to the crisis resolution³⁵.

Crises in the region have been frequent and aggravated by underdeveloped economies, an unstable political climate, ethno-national and political divisions and legacies of wars. In the course of these crises, media fail to fulfil the journalistic ideal and in part act in its direct opposition, contributing to the aggravation of the crisis. This includes direct breaches of basic norms, for example through a lack of fact-checking, siding with particular political camps, sensationalism etc., or simply by failing to provide information key to understanding the crisis or to consult alternative sources. Such flaws of media reporting do not come as a surprise, since journalism in the region is itself in a continuous crisis, operating in circumstances of political and corporate capture and scarce resources. The idea of public-service journalism is under-promoted even at the level of public discussions, in practice pushed to the margins of the media mainstream. As a result, the flaws of journalism are increasingly accepted as a norm.

Crisis situations are taken as an opportunity for political elites to consolidate their power. Mutual antagonism between ethno-national or political factions feeds into the actively promoted notion that the nation is under threat, which almost never fails to cement the support of the electorate for the ruling groups. Instead of resisting such instrumentalisation, media readily serves particular interests. Modes of influence do not have to include patterns of direct control, or even self-censorship (although it is considered to be widespread), but are easily realised through scarce capacities for good journalism. Reliance on official sources to communicate the crisis, an utter lack of critical distance towards the source, a lack of active pursuit of missing information and efforts to include pluralistic views and to actively question the framing of the problems and solutions are in themselves sufficient to do the damage.

A lack of sensibility towards the ethno-national and political other further limits the integrity of media reporting on the crises. This is particularly evident in countries of the former Yugoslavia, where ethno-national differentiation continues to be the dominant principle of socio-political life, and where the media sector did not sufficiently distance itself from the patriotic journalism and propaganda practiced during the Balkan wars. Instead of employing multiperspectival reading of events in their everyday practices, media outlets often show favouritism towards particular ethnic and/or political camps.

Communication practices of state institutions and officials are an additional challenge. From providing ready-made materials, through engaging exclusively in one-sided communication (issued statements, appearances on “friendly” media), to the failure to respond to requests for information, officials easily control the flow of information and block possibilities for questioning by journalists.

The media community also shares responsibility as it remains insufficiently organised and

³⁵ One should again note that the research is by no means representative of entire media community, or even of reporting of media outlets included in the sample, but that merely illustrates some of the reporting patterns. Further research is needed for more generalisable conclusions.

often divided, unable to promote highest values of journalism and structural conditions that would enable journalists to deploy them in practice (more autonomy, better protection of labour rights, working conditions, etc). On the contrary, the community fails to reflect on the decay of media integrity and to articulate what journalism should be, which would be a basis for any future positive changes. Similarly, the institutions providing education for journalists do not sensitise journalists for high quality reporting crises.

While advocacy for systemic changes in the media system is very important, we can argue that reporting on a crisis should not be treated like business as usual. While critical distance is, for example, an inherent part of journalistic ideologies in general, journalists should take special care not to uncritically transmit inflammatory claims that in circumstances of a pronounced social controversy can contribute to the aggravation of crisis. This research also indicates a dominant focus of the media on events (such as violent protest events, clashes of refugees and police etc.), while elaboration of processes and contexts is neglected. As a result, media framing of the crises in the region was largely based on polarization (on a political and/or ethno-national basis), went in line with framing of political officials and reinforced the dominant ideologies.³⁶ Issues of public interest are neglected, including human rights issues concerning discrimination (in BiH) and treatment of national minorities (in Serbia) or issues related to environmental protection (in Albania). While the discourse was not in principle discriminatory, the media engaged in discriminatory practices inasmuch as they underrepresented views of the ethno-national “other” (particularly in BiH, Serbia and Kosovo). In other cases, it was the political “other” that was under-represented by particular media (Montenegro, partly Macedonia and Serbia), while in most of cases voices from the civil sector were also largely missing (for example voices of protesters in Albania or refugees in Macedonia).

Finally, media clearly lacked the orientation to conflict resolution. Here we do not argue that conflict resolution - in line with concept of peace journalism - should necessarily be the primary goal of media reporting. However, by neglecting to discuss the potential for resolution of the crisis, while communicating conflicts and even calls for arms, the media are essentially acting contrary to the interests of the public. Inciting violence and hatred through media should be once and for all made a thing of a past.

As suggested by authors in this research, in-depth reporting, investigation of underreported issues of public interest, the watchdog role and scrutiny of authorities’ actions, as well as promotion of public accountability should be made the focal points of media reporting, in particular reporting in crisis situations. For this to become a reality, both the state and the media community will need to act to minimise structural constraints, as well as to promote the capacities for quality crisis reporting. Positive examples of media reporting on crises surely exist (as indicated in some of the national reports), but decisive efforts should be made to make such reporting prevalent.

³⁶ See for example Wolfsfeld, 1997. However, he also notes that journalism can also challenge the official sources.

Recommendations

The following are more specific recommendations based primarily on the six country reports:

State institutions:

- Relevant state institutions (mainly legislative bodies) should develop policies aimed at **increased transparency of relations between ownership and funding of media**. In Serbia such policies have been introduced but the initial evaluations suggest their implementation should be improved and made more consistent.
- State institutions should develop policies that promote **legitimacy of public funding of media**. Mainly, these policies should prevent abuse of public funding of media (direct funding, grants, advertising), and provide conditions for legitimate state funding and advertising practices (reliable audience measurement, institutions that will monitor the market practices and state funding, adequate measures to correct illegitimate practices); Government funding for media should promote public service journalism (through support for education and for production) and be conditioned on internal guarantees of editorial independence and good track-record of media in respect of ethical norms. The same goes for funding by international donors.
- Law enforcement institutions should improve **implementation of labour rights** of journalists, and **safety** of journalists.
- State institutions should increase their transparency, consistently comply with freedom of information acts, and proactively engage in **communication with the public during crisis situations**. This should include informing the public comprehensively and on time, responding to journalists' questions and engaging in interactive communication formats.
- Relevant state institutions (mainly respective ministries and legislative bodies) should aim to safeguard **editorial independence** of media through legislative and policy changes. This involves de-politicisation of the appointment of managers and editors of public service broadcasters, and making decisions on allocation of public funds independent of political structures.

Journalistic community: (self-)regulatory bodies, journalist organisations, media outlets:

- Media community, particularly professional associations, should join efforts in **advocating for the above-listed changes**. They should pursue promotion of media integrity through different actions, such as public discussions, education, and advocacy.
- Regulatory and self-regulatory bodies should continue to **promote journalistic norms**, through (self-)regulation actions, improving cooperation with potential membership of self-regulatory body, public discussions and debates that would promote self-regulation among journalists but also among citizens. In Albania and Montenegro, a joint self-regulatory bodies should be founded, or at least the internal self-regulatory mechanisms in media outlets developed.

- Regulatory and self-regulatory bodies should be provided sufficient resources and powers for regular **monitoring of breaches of ethical norms**, especially during crisis situations. In some of the countries the independence and public image of these bodies should be improved. In fragmented societies where ethno-national identities are made the central organizational/guiding principle of political life, special attention should be given to monitoring and sanctioning of discriminatory media reporting during crisis situations that can potentially increase inter-ethnic animosities.
- Media outlets should demonstrate their public service role by **adopting guaranties of editorial independence**, including appointments of editors based on merits and opinion of journalists, as well as by promoting the editorial and journalistic autonomy within the media statutes and in labor contract, and demonstrating consistent implementation of those guaranties. Such actions should be a way to improve the public trust should be promoted on the level of organizations of media owners, and should be made a condition for public funding for media.
- Media outlets should formalize their **internal editorial guidelines** to favour in-depth reporting, fact-checking, pluralism of voices, critical stance towards singular sources, seeking clarification and eradicating sensationalism, sensitive approach to controversial issues and cases of crises. Media outlets should also preferably develop a transparent and accountable system of audience complaints.
- Media community, particularly professional associations, self-regulators and NGOs, should **publicly condemn violations of ethical norms** that media fail to correct (publishing information, engaging in discussions), and promote ideal-typical values of journalism through research, public debates and training programs.
- Media community should **promote the public service role** of the media and respond to scepticism towards the highest journalistic values. This means promoting alternative models of funding that would enable media to act in public interest, but also greater dedication of media organisations and journalists towards these principles. Since these values are greatly influenced by dominant social factors, they should be continuously debated and (re)defined by the community, addressing also the frequent crises in the region and the best way to serve public interest during such crises. Education on human rights issues should be important part of journalistic education, as well promotion of the watchdog role, i.e. of putting government structures under scrutiny, in particular during the crises. While (self-)regulation can sanction extreme breaches of journalistic norms, an overreaching promotion of the highest journalistic values is needed for true improvement of journalistic practices.
- Journalistic community should **strengthen cooperation between journalists and organisations** within their own country but also among the countries in the region. Better cooperation would enable exchange of information in crisis situations, especially where funds are limited, security threats present, or language barriers hinder journalistic work. Cooperation can go further, to include exchanging experiences and opinions about crisis reporting through education and workshops on crisis and related issues such as multiculturalism; In Kosovo, associations are also advised to promote security of movement of

journalists and to organise Albanian and Serbian language course for their members.

- **Promoting diversity** among producers of media content. Media can attempt to employ journalists of different background, and this can especially be a norm for public service media; also cooperation with other journalists and media can be promoted during crises. Cross ethnic reporting on ethnically sensitive issues can be helpful in providing more inclusive media reports.
- Media and journalist associations should **promote the respect of labour rights of journalists** and security conditions for journalistic work (engage in possible legislative changes, improve relations with police, relevant inspectorates and judiciary, provide legal support for journalists etc.)

Journalists:

- Journalists should provide **in-depth reports**, verify information, seek clarification and plurality of sources, provide context and investigate issues of public interest.
- In relation to officials, journalists should seek two-way communication, actively asking for information they are failing to provide, posing critical questions that call for clarifications and accountability of officials, and providing critical distance towards statements of officials.
- Overall, **voices of political elites should be made less dominant**; in particular media outlets should not serve as platforms through which only political elites disseminate framing of problems and solutions in crisis situations. Journalists should actively seek perspectives of actors of different social and political backgrounds. For example, (possibly different) voices of experts should be included more regularly in particular for elaboration of complex issues such as those related to law, economy, or geopolitics.
- Journalists (and media organizations) should adopt the notion of **interculturalism** in media reports, seeking to **include the perspectives** and interests of different social groups (including marginalized groups) in everyday reporting. Furthermore, in crisis reporting journalists should show particular sensitivity, aiming to cover all relevant perspectives and include voices of different social groups. In three analysed cases, the need for sensitization on interests and views of “other” ethnic groups was particularly emphasized. Journalists can consult available guidelines for reporting diversity and engage in additional education on these matters.
- Media outlets/journalists should seek to **improve the depth of reporting**, to provide **background** of the stories, including expert analysis and elaborations, thorough presentation of policy issues, as well as human angle of public interest issues. Current practices of failing to check facts, making distinction between fact and opinion or speculation, should be abandoned.

Education institutions:

Journalistic education should promote the highest values of journalism but also acknowledge the role of media in respect of promoting diversity, fostering conflict resolution and reconciliation and promoting dialogue rather than reproducing antagonising views on crisis situations.

University institutions, civil society, self-regulators and professional associations should provide education for journalists that includes:

- **Familiarizing with conditions that determine the quality of journalism**, whereby journalists should be familiarized with the constraints on journalistic freedom (related to media ownership and funding etc.) and difficulties in accessing information in possession of state institutions (failure to provide relevant information, one-sided communication, ready-made PR materials); education should provide practical advice on how to overcome the obstacles in everyday journalistic work and how to engage in needed policy changes.
- Developing a **critical stance towards news sources**, including critical review of particular statements, seeking for additional explanations, fact-checking and alternative sources. Education programs should warn about the tendency of overt reliance on official sources and the dangers of subsequent neglect of public interest and of alternative perspectives.
- **Promotion of the highest values of journalism**, i.e. discussing what journalism ideally should be. Principles of public interest, watchdog role, calling authorities for accountability, providing pluralism, and similar should be made operational in specific journalistic practices (choices of topics, sources, perspectives, questions, etc.).
- Education on **human rights issues** and **familiarization with concepts of interculturalism**, sensitization of journalists to different views and interests depending on social groups (ethno-national groups, migrants, women etc.); education should promote substantial pluralism on issues of particular importance for specific groups based on ethnic or religious background, gender, sexual orientation etc., but also promote everyday reporting that is inclusive of multitude of views and identities.
- **Lessons from recent history of warmongering in Balkan journalism** in the 1990s should be introduced as part of courses on journalism ethics and history of journalism, and in general **consequences** of unethical journalism and failure to report in the interest of the public should be discussed.
- **Practical experiences and advice** on recent cases of media reporting on crisis should be provided. The best and worst practices can be presented based on personal experiences, records of (self-)regulatory bodies and available research, to illustrate, for example, the lack of pluralism or the discriminatory language and treatment by media.
- **Guides for reporting diversity**, and in particular issues and groups, such as refugees, migrants, ethnicity, religion, political crises and conflicts (such as guides of the Media Diversity Institute).
- **Exercises in debating** and engaging in communication based on relevant argumentation and

respect for the opinions of the others.

- Researchers in this volume also indicate that education should not neglect **basic journalistic skills**, including fact-checking, distinguishing between facts and assumptions, in-depth reporting, and storytelling.

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