
FOREIGN MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST – POLITICAL INFLUENCE OR A CONTRIBUTION TO DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the role of foreign media in promoting the public interest in Bosnia and Herzegovina within the context of a politically fragmented and economically vulnerable media system. The research focuses on the activities of international media actors such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Al Jazeera Balkans, which over the past decades have represented an important source of alternative information and professional journalistic standards in the Western Balkans region. The methodological framework is based on a qualitative approach that includes an analysis of relevant academic literature and semi-structured interviews with university professors and experts in media and communication studies. The results indicate that foreign media have contributed to information pluralism and the promotion of issues of public interest, particularly in the areas of anti-corruption efforts, human rights, and political accountability. At the same time, respondents emphasize that the activities of these media outlets should also be viewed within the broader context of international communication strategies and the concept of soft power. The analysis further shows that international financial support has significantly influenced the development of the media sector, as international donors have invested tens of millions of euros in the development of media and journalistic capacities in Bosnia and Herzegovina over the past decades. In the context of declining international funding and the closure of certain foreign editorial offices, questions arise regarding the sustainability of the domestic media system and its capacity to independently ensure information pluralism and the protection of the public interest.

Keywords: foreign media, public interest, media pluralism, Bosnia and Herzegovina, soft power

1. INTRODUCTION

The media system of Bosnia and Herzegovina is characterized by pronounced political fragmentation, economic vulnerability, and deep communication polarization (Džihana & Sokol, 2025; Udovičić et al., 2022; Osmančević & Šušnjar, 2021). Numerous studies indicate that the country's media landscape is strongly shaped by ethnic divisions, political influences, and economic dependence on centers of power (Car et al., 2016; Kužel et al., 2015).

In such an environment, foreign media have played a specific role. Thanks to their greater technical capacities, transnational perspective, and relative editorial autonomy, they have introduced alternative narratives and professional standards into the domestic media space. At the same time, their activities are often interpreted as part of broader communication strategies of the states that finance them, which in international relations theory is associated with the concept of so-called soft power.

The central research question of this paper is: How do foreign media influence the realization of the public interest in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly in the context of declining international funding and the closure of certain foreign media outlets?

The paper focuses on two important international media actors – Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Al Jazeera Balkans – which for many years produced media content for Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans region and employed a significant number of journalists.

The aim of the research is to analyze academic literature, existing studies, and expert perceptions regarding the role of foreign media in shaping the public interest and media pluralism in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research is based on a qualitative methodological approach that combines the analysis of academic literature with semi-structured in-depth interviews with experts in media and communication studies. The semi-structured interview method was selected because it allows the combination of predefined research questions with the freedom for respondents to elaborate on complex processes such as media influence, political communication, and the public interest.

The study included the following academic experts: Vuk Vučetić (University of East Sarajevo), Enes Osmančević (University of Tuzla), and Lejla Ramić-Mesihović (Burch University Sarajevo). The analysis was supplemented by publicly available expert comments from Professor Lejla Turčilo of the University of Sarajevo.

The interviews addressed several key thematic areas:

- professional standards of foreign media
- political and economic influences on their work

- contribution to the public interest
- relations with the domestic media market
- consequences of the potential withdrawal of foreign media.

A limitation of the research is the relatively small number of respondents, meaning that the results cannot be statistically generalized. However, they provide valuable insights into expert perceptions regarding the role of foreign media within the domestic communication space.

The research also draws on media analyses and publicly available documents that reflect the socio-political context relevant to the topic of the study.

3. RESULTS

The interview results show a relatively high level of agreement among experts that foreign media have played a significant role in strengthening professional standards and media pluralism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Respondents emphasize that media outlets such as Radio Free Europe and Al Jazeera Balkans often served as an alternative to politically oriented domestic media. Their relative independence from local political structures enabled them to address topics that were often marginalized within the domestic media environment, such as corruption, abuse of power, and human rights issues.

According to Vučetić, foreign media operate within broader political and ideological contexts related to their sources of funding. However, this does not necessarily imply direct propaganda, but rather the promotion of certain values and political narratives.

Turčilo emphasizes that international media networks such as Al Jazeera also possess a dimension of media diplomacy. Nevertheless, in the regional context, Al Jazeera Balkans is often regarded as one of the most professionally credible television channels.

Osmančević argues that foreign media have represented an important corrective to the highly politicized domestic media environment, in which bias and political propaganda are often dominant communication models.

Respondents also warn that the withdrawal of foreign media could further reduce information pluralism and weaken critical public debate. Solutions may lie in the development of sustainable domestic models, stronger partnerships with regional and international actors, and the clearer definition of media policy objectives in the service of the public interest.

A detailed search of available sources and communication with media and research institutes suggests that there is no publicly available systematic content analysis of Radio Free Europe programming in South Slavic languages. However, the organization Media Initiatives conducted three separate seven-day media monitoring studies in 2015. The results showed that topics of actual or projected public interest—such as anti-corruption efforts, human rights, and regional cooperation—accounted for about 20 percent of the content in the main news programs of public broadcasters, while they represented around 40 percent of the radio news program of Radio Free Europe for Bosnia and Herzegovina (Medijske inicijative, 2015).

In the context of political bias, an indicative example may be found in a brief monitoring exercise conducted on March 10 and 11, 2025, for the purposes of a university lecture by the author of this paper. The analysis showed that on both days more than 50 percent of the regional news program of Radio Free Europe was devoted to protests in Serbia. Within this coverage, approximately 30 audio statements or paraphrased statements were recorded from students, politicians, activists, and analysts critical of the government, while only two paraphrased statements from representatives of the ruling structures were recorded, one of which was a statement by the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić.

4. DISCUSSION

Since the new administration led by President Donald Trump came to power in the United States, a political debate has emerged regarding the justification for financing international media services such as Radio Free Europe or Voice of America. Some political actors argue that these media outlets do not produce sufficient political or communication effects relative to the level of budgetary expenditures.

Such views have been expressed on several occasions by U.S. President Donald Trump, who criticized American international media services, claiming that they do not sufficiently contribute to U.S. interests in international communication. Similar positions have also been expressed by Kari Lake, a political ally of Donald Trump and a figure associated with the leadership structures of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), who emphasized the need for cost rationalization and the redefinition of international media strategy (Trump, 2025; Lake, 2025).

The role of media in society is crucial for democratic life. Media pluralism enables the existence of diverse sources of information and media outlets with different editorial orientations, which is essential for the formation of independent opinions and the shaping of public opinion. In this way, citizens can compare their own views with the

information they receive, as well as compare different sources of information, and thus form opinions about social developments (Sefo, 2021).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the research results confirm that foreign media operate as multidimensional actors that simultaneously belong to the sphere of professional journalism and broader geopolitical communication strategies. From the perspective of media theory, their activities can be explained through the concept of agenda-setting, according to which media influence public priorities through the selection and emphasis of particular topics (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McQuail, 2010).

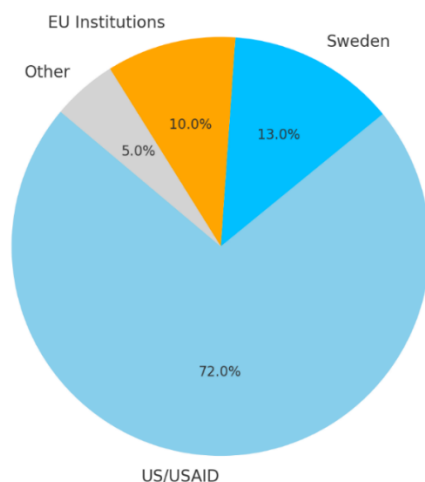
By highlighting topics such as corruption, democracy, and human rights, foreign media have contributed to shaping public debate and perceptions of the public interest. At the same time, their activities cannot be viewed outside the broader political and diplomatic context. The activities of foreign media are often part of soft power strategies, meaning influence exercised through the promotion of values, ideas, and political narratives (Nye, 2004; Castells, 2009). Therefore, the contribution of foreign media to the public interest should not be viewed exclusively through a normative lens. In many cases, it represents a secondary or collateral effect of broader communication and diplomatic strategies pursued by the states and organizations that finance them.

The reduction of international funding for domestic media and the closure of key foreign editorial offices is occurring at a time when local media lack the capacity to independently fulfill the role of guardians of the public interest. In such a context, there is a risk that the media space will become even more vulnerable to political pressure, disinformation, and economic dependence.

Nevertheless, within a media system such as that of Bosnia and Herzegovina—characterized by political and ethnic fragmentation and economic instability—the presence of foreign media has often contributed to greater information pluralism and the professionalization of journalism.

An additional challenge for private and so-called independent media has been the suspension of numerous projects and the restructuring of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which has remained under the umbrella of the U.S. State Department but with significantly reduced resources. This financial support for domestic media can also be interpreted as an element of soft power exercised through domestic actors. According to available data, approximately 90 million USD were invested in media projects in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia between 2019 and 2024. Between 2020 and 2023, USAID is estimated to have provided more than 70 percent of total Western support for media in the region, followed by Sweden and the European Union (Mailchimp, 2025).

Donor Investment in Media Assistance in Western Balkans (2020-2023)



Source: <https://d-portal.org/>
All IATI (International Aid Transparency Initiative) data
comparable with latest OECD DAC CRS data

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, international donors—including USAID, the EU, DFID, the Open Society Foundations, and others—are estimated to have invested more than 100 million euros in media programs between 1996 and 2015 (Iron & Jusić, 2018). Between 2017 and 2025 alone, USAID invested approximately 14 million dollars in media development through the IMEP project and Internews, supporting journalists, citizen journalism initiatives, media education, research, and the salaries of staff involved in project implementation.

The loss of these resources has already left visible consequences for the country's media landscape. It has weakened the availability of alternative media content and reduced the prominence of topics such as diversity, corruption, and minority rights.

5. CONCLUSION

The research results confirm that foreign media have played a significant role in shaping the media landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina over the past decades. In the context of a politically polarized and economically unstable media system, international media actors such as Radio Free Europe and Al Jazeera Balkans have often served as alternative sources of information and contributed to strengthening professional journalistic standards. Respondents emphasize that these media outlets frequently addressed issues that were marginalized in the domestic media environment, including corruption, political accountability, and human rights.

At the same time, the analysis indicates that the activities of foreign media cannot be viewed outside the broader geopolitical and communication context. Their funding structures and editorial strategies are often linked to the concept of soft power and the international political interests of the states that support them. Consequently, their contribution to the public interest may sometimes represent the outcome of broader communication strategies rather than solely the normative objectives of professional journalism.

A particular challenge for the media system of Bosnia and Herzegovina is the reduction of international financial support and the closure of certain foreign media operations. Over the past decades, international donors have invested substantial resources in the development of the media sector. It is estimated that more than 100 million euros were invested in media development programs between the end of the war and the mid-2010s, while USAID alone has invested several million dollars in recent years in journalism development, media research, and professional education programs.

The loss of part of these financial resources has already contributed to a decline in alternative media content and projects focused on issues of public interest. In such circumstances, a key question becomes the ability of domestic media to develop sustainable financial and professional models capable of ensuring information pluralism and a high-quality public debate.

The future development of the media system in Bosnia and Herzegovina will depend on a combination of strengthening domestic institutional capacities, establishing more transparent funding models, continuing cooperation with international partners in the field of professional journalism development, and strengthening democratic relations across all spheres of society.

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