

Media in Croatia: Between a National Past and European Future

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Croatia's media landscape is in a state of transition, from state-controlled media, through authoritarian administration, towards a democratic pluralistic media landscape. The development of journalism has for the most part followed the political path. In Croatia, media is subject to the constitution, freedom of information laws, anti-trust laws, criminal law and laws for the protection of confidentiality.

In 2003, the electronic media law superseded the previously applicable telecommunications law. It contains guidelines for private and public broadcast media. In addition, it regulates the licensing of commercial and private stations. It also forbids mergers between broadcasters and network providers. Ultimately, the law dictates the requirements for cross-media ownership – as a result of which the proprietors of broadcasting stations may not simultaneously own a national broadcast license and a daily newspaper with a circulation of over 3000 copies.¹ As a further legal guideline, the law regulates Croatian radio and television (HRT), the legal status, the organization, the management system and the control of public broadcasting. This is defined as a public institution, is fee-financed, and may broadcast nine minutes of adverts per hour. The HRT is divided into three organizational units: Croatian radio (HR), Croatian television (HTV), and music production (MP). The leading entities of the HRT are the programming board, the HRT management board, and the director general.²

The programming board occupies a central position, representing the interests of the public.³ It is crucial in determining programming and appoints key figures such as the directors general of television and radio. The programming board has eleven members, appointed by parliament on the basis of a list of candidates created during an open competition in which citizens, institutions and non-governmental organizations may take part.

Croatia, an official candidate for entry to the EU since June 2004, is endeavouring to implement EU media legislation. In June 2007, the 10th chapter of EU membership negotiations (information society and media) was opened. In the last progress report of November 2008, there was positive mention that Croatia had brought her broadcasting laws into line with European regula-

¹ Cf. Mladen Kovačević, *Croatia* p. 229–31.

² Cf. Hrvatska Radiotelevizija (ed.), *Organization of Croatian Radio and Television*.

³ Cf. Mladen Kovačević, *Croatia* p. 201.

tions.⁴ Thus the law on electronic media implements the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (previously: Television Without Frontiers Directive), in that it regulates the cross-border traffic of media products.⁵

The most widely-read daily newspaper in Croatia is 24 sata ("24 Hours"). The newspaper is produced in tabloid format and is read by around 800,000 people – which amounts to 20 percent of the population. The Vecernji List ("Evening Paper") reaches 540,000 readers, mostly Croatian professionals. Since the first edition in 1959, the Vecernji List has grown to be one of the most widely-read newspapers in Yugoslavia, with a focus on fashion and sport. In the 90s, it belonged to supporters of Tudjman, but later switched to a government-critical stance. Today, it is known for its good-quality investigative journalism as well as its predominantly neutral stance with an occasional nationalist bias.

A strong competitor of this newspaper is the Jutarnji List ("Morning paper"), which was launched in April 1998. The Jutarnji List is read predominantly by educated men aged 30–39 – frequently also in the workplace. By contrast, 24 sata is mostly preferred by young people under 29. The newspaper Slobodna Dalmacija ("Free Dalmatia"), which reaches 220,000 readers, was first published in 1943. The first edition was published by Tito's partisans during the period of Italian occupation. At the beginning of the 1990s, the newspaper distinguished itself as one of the media outlets with the fewest political ties and greatest independence. In May 2005, the newspaper was privatized once again and sold to the WAZ-EPH group. A further newspaper is the liberal, left-wing Novi List ("New Paper"), which was one of the few newspapers in the 90s to take a stance that was critical of Tudjman.

Along with these major Croatian print products, there are also products in minority languages: in Italian there are La voce del popolo, Panorama, Arcobaleno and La batana, in Czech there are Jednota, Detsky koutek, Prehled and Cesky lidovy kalendar. There are also products in Hungarian (Uj Magyar Kepes Ujsag), Ukrainian (Nova Dumka), Serbian (Novosti, Identitet), German (Deutsches Wort), as well as Hebrew (Ha-kol).⁶

In Croatia there are 21 licensed television broadcasters, of which only two are financed and controlled subject to public law; all others are private stations (as of 2008).⁷ Alongside the two television channels under public control, HTV1 and HTV2, there are two private broadcasters with nation-wide

⁴ Cf. European Commission (ed.), *Audiovisual policy and prospective new members of the EU* http://ec.europa.eu/avpolicy/ext/enlargement/index_en.htm [23.10.2009].

⁵ Cf. European Commission (ed.), *Croatia 2008 Progress Report* Brussels: European Commission, 2008), p. 37.

⁶ Cf. Mladen Kovačević, *Croatia* p. 216.

⁷ Cf. Republic of Croatia, Central Bureau of Statistics (ed.), *Radio and Television Broadcasting, 2008*. http://www.dzs.hr/default_e.htm [23.10.2009].

licenses: Nova TV and RTL. Around 30 per cent of the output is accounted for by domestic Croatian productions.⁸ The content of RTL Televizija is oriented towards that of parent company RTL, but also uses a number of in-house productions.

In Croatia, there are 146 radio stations, four of which hold a national license. At the last count, 16 stations held regional and 126 held local licenses (as of 2008).⁹ In contrast to its dominant position in television, the HRT is not foremost in radio broadcasting. The top position is held by talk radio station Narodni Radio ("People's Radio"), followed by the public HR1 and the music station Otvoreni Radio. As with television, there is also a range of private stations, some commercial and some owned by non-commercial organizations or institutions, such as universities or the Catholic Church.¹⁰

In 1999, Tudjman's last year in government, the state still controlled a majority of the media, including distribution houses.¹¹ Even in 2003, the state share of media companies still amounted to 82 per cent. Today, print media are required by law to pass data about the ownership structure, number of customers and sales to the chamber of commerce.¹² This requirement is however limited to the number of copies printed, and not actual sales. But not only are media sales statistics still not transparent enough; the exact property situation also suffers from inadequate transparency. As far as can be ascertained, 75 per cent of print media is owned by foreign investors. A dominant role is played by the WAZ group, which has been part of a joint enterprise with Europapress Holding (EPH) since December 1998.¹³ The Austrian company Styria Medien AG also owns a range of titles.

Although the programming board, as the most important agency of public media in Croatia, is not officially supposed to hold any political ties, political pressure on public institutions can nonetheless not be ruled out.¹⁴ After all, Croatian media have only been able to develop without major limitations since the year 2000. Several commentators are of the opinion that there is still major state influence on public television.¹⁵ The OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) criticizes the political dependence of

⁸ Cf. Central European Media Enterprises (ed.) *Nova TV*. <http://www.cetv-net.com/en/tv-stations/nova-tv-hr.shtml> [23.10.2009].

⁹ Cf. Republic of Croatia, Central Bureau of Statistics (ed.), *Radio and Television Broadcasting, 2008*. http://www.dzs.hr/default_e.htm [23.10.2009].

¹⁰ Cf. Ebenda.

¹¹ Cf. Malović, *Croatia*, p. 132.

¹² Cf. Aidan White, European Federation of Journalists (ed.), *Media Power in Europe: The Big Picture of Ownership* (Brussels: European Federation of Journalists, 2005), p. 34.

¹³ Cf. Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (ed.), *Kroatien*, <http://www.waz-mediengruppe.de/Kroatien.26.0.html?&L> [23.10.2009].

¹⁴ Of note is the legal amendment proposed in 2003 whereby candidates for the programming board would be nominated by political parties instead of society. This would have been a backward step in the independence of the programming board.

¹⁵ Cf. Simone Schlindwein, *Zwischen Propaganda und Kommerz* (Berlin: n-ost, 2007), 60.

the HRT programming board.¹⁶ Although the members of the programming board are nominated by socially relevant groups, they still have to be selected by parliament. Thus they remain dependent on the prevailing political majority: "This clearly leaves a lot to be desired in terms of transparency"¹⁷.

Along with coming to terms with communism and nationalism, ethnic questions are a great problem in Croatia. In 2005, the Helsinki Committee reported in HTV various cases of hate speech against the Serbian minority. There were also complaints from Serbian journalists about limitations on their conditions of employment. Furthermore, repeated complaints were made public from Muslim journalists who felt held back in their professional development. However, the Open Society Institute announced that the government as well as the media and the public have become more tolerant as a whole. Public discussions about controversial topics are once again possible.

Thus, overall it can be said that a positive development has taken place since 2000. However, as in many countries in south east Europe, further changes remain necessary. There may be clear rules, in accordance with European standards, to protect the freedom of expression, but the provisions of anti-trust legislation are insufficient to prevent concentration in the media.¹⁸ The regulations concerning the institutional composition of the leading entities in public television also do not exclude state influence: on the contrary, they encourage it. The majority of local media is financed by local or regional political structures. In this respect, political influence on these aspects of the media is structurally deep-rooted. In the November 2008 EU progress report on Croatia, it was consequently established: "Nevertheless, some interference in the media landscape by mainly economic and political interest groups has continued."¹⁹

The background sketched here emphasizes the need for targeted improvement of individual aspects of the Croatian media landscape. This includes the foundation of a press board, increasing the political independence of public radio, and the promotion of democratic understanding in the field of political communication, to prevent encroachments on media freedom in cases of unfavourable coverage. In addition, measures must be initiated to guarantee media independence in smaller localities. Only in this way can the influence of the local administrative elite be limited. Only once these steps have been implemented will journalists in Croatia be able to join their colleagues in other countries in making a full contribution to society.

¹⁶ Cf. Mladen Kovačević, *Croatia*, p. 228.

¹⁷ OSI, *Croatia*, p. 450

¹⁸ According to a joint study by the Universities of Dubrovnik and Zadar and the Binoza media company, WAZ and Styria Medien AG own around 90 per cent of daily newspapers in the country.

¹⁹ European Commission (ed.), *Croatia 2008 Progress Report* (Brussels: European Commission, 2008), p. 37.

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