

## Public Service Media in Serbia: A State of Flux

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### Introduction

In the days of Yugoslavia, each republic and autonomous province has had its own major RTV station in the respective capital. They were all networked into a loose common organisation called Jugoslovenska Radiotelevizija (JRT). With the dismantling of the federal state, its former units – the emerging new nations – all inherited all significant broadcasting resources in their territories, such as buildings, studios, production facilities, transmission infrastructure and frequencies. In the second half of the 1990s, media systems started undergoing a restructuring process aimed at democratisation in all new states, including Serbia. European standards and rules on press freedom were assimilated in view of aspirations of the new states to join the European Union. Privatisation went underway. The major state broadcasting companies started to transform into public service media (PSM) after quite a long process of legal, organisational and operative adjustments to the new media environment.

### History of public service media in Serbia

The media system in Serbia went from the socialist self-management period after 1990 to the phase dominated by the authoritarian political regime until 2000. Both periods were characterised by strong state/party control of media ownership, management and editorial policy. Faced with separatist tendencies aiming to disintegrate the Republic of Serbia, the Milošević regime amalgamated RTV stations in Belgrade, Novi Sad (Vojvodina) and Prishtina (Kosovo and Metohija) into a single, centralised state broadcaster in 1992. As a result, editorial policies were made to serve the political and propagandistic aims of the regime. Many disobedient employees lost their jobs. The end of the authoritarian regime in October 2000 brought a change in media policy that aimed at removing the influence of politics and other centres of power from journalism and the media, but those goals have not been fully achieved.

## A Pillar of Democracy on Shaky Ground

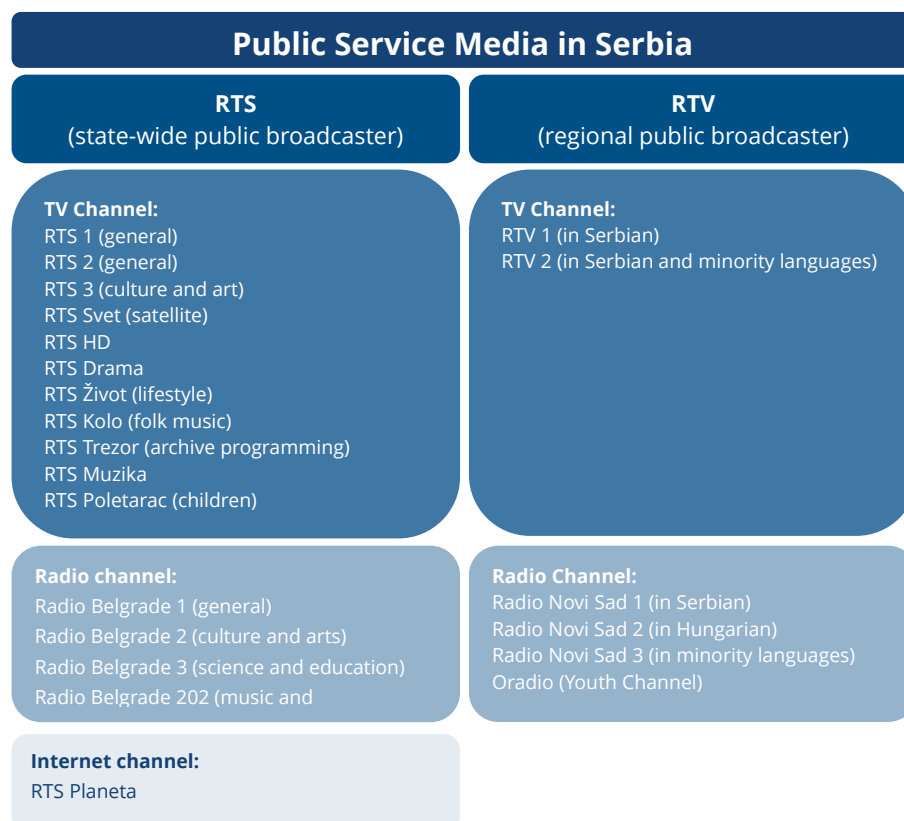
Radio Television Serbia remained a state company after 2000 for six more years while the restructuring into public service media was in process. The broadcasting centre in Prishtina was destroyed by NATO bombing (like the one in Novi Sad) and was taken over by international administration under the auspices of the UN. After Kosovo declared independence, the Kosovo section ceased to be part of the Serbian broadcasting system both institutionally and technically.

Serbia is one of the Balkan countries still undergoing social transition and democratisation. Its goal to enter the EU is still a long bumpy road ahead. Serbia applied for EU membership in December 2009 and in 2012 obtained the candidate status. In December 2015, the first two chapters of negotiation on the harmonisation of national law with 'acquis communautaire' were opened. At the same time, substantial economic, legal and social reforms took place, slowly moving the country toward compliance with EU standards. However, the overall environment did not make it easy to achieve full press freedom. Mass media is barely hanging on to life due to numerous political, economic and professional obstacles. The media went from being a slave to an authoritarian regime to being under the thumb of the current pro-European regime. The powers that consider themselves entitled to having the media on their side after being ignored for a long time in the 1990s. Politicians exert pressure by changing laws, controlling money flows and interfering in the recruitment of senior management. Wherever the media try to engage in political communication independently or in the role as a watchdog serving the general public, it runs into difficulties. Public service media were and remain the most vulnerable.

### Structure of public service media

Right after the democratic upheaval in October 2000, a conference of media experts, representatives of civil society and lawyers was convened to draft the new Law on Public Information. The legislation enacted after two years of work has laid the foundations of a brand-new media system in Serbia. The aims of the restructuring were to end media ownership by the state, legalise private enterprise in the field, establish an independent broadcasting agency as an independent top regulatory body for electronic media, and strengthen public service media. The Council of Europe, the OSCE, and the EU oversaw the transition process, offering

not just intellectual but financial aid through their CARDS and IPA projects.<sup>1</sup> According to different sources, in 2008 the reform of Radio Television Serbia had cost 3.5 million Euro.



The Law on Public Information (2003) dismantled the state-owned Radio Television Serbia Company and transformed it into a public service broadcaster. The main broadcasting station in the autonomous province of Vojvodina got back its organisational autonomy, the goal being the same. Transmitters and uplinks for dissemination by terrestrial broadcast that used to belong to the RTS,

<sup>1</sup> CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation) was the instrument for technical and financial help of the EU for countries participating into stabilisation and accession process until 2007.  
IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance) is the funding mechanism of EU for both candidate and potential candidate countries heading towards EU membership.

meaning that the RTS used to enjoy a *de facto* monopoly position, were removed from RTS control and restructured into separate enterprises. Pursuant to the provisions of the Law on Public Information, the independent regulatory body – the Republic Broadcasting Agency (RRA) – was established. Its first duty was to legalise all broadcasters after transparent tenders, apportioning (together with the Telecommunication Agency) frequencies and other technical resources to facilitate their work. Due to the complexity of the legal and organisational changes caused by the implementation of the Law on Public Information, the restructuring of the RTS and RTV into public service broadcasters was not completed until 2006. Since then Serbia has had two public service broadcasters – the RTS in Belgrade and RTV in Novi Sad. Both media institutions have a special role in Serbian social, cultural and political life. According to witnesses to the transformation, the change was more successful in terms of programming than in terms of its financial and management aspects.

In 2011, Serbian media have entered the next phase of their evolution. After a series of public debates with journalists' associations, media owners and experts in the field, the Media Strategy 2011–2016 was hammered out and adopted by the government. The first three tasks of the strategy's Action Plan required a comprehensive rewrite of Serbia's media legislation. A new set of laws – consisting of the Law on Public Information and Media, the Law on Public Service Media, and the Law on Electronic Media – was enacted in August 2014. For the first time, the public broadcasting system was the subject of specific, dedicated legislation. The Law was in conformance with European principles and recommendations laid out in EU documents dealing with the digitalisation of audio-visual media services.

The legislative package establishing the public media sector still needs to be fully implemented. There are shortcomings in practice such as an unusual way of financing and the politically biased appointment of the managing bodies. For example, the Law on Public Service Media was amended in 2015 in order to regulate the funding of two public service broadcasters.<sup>2</sup> In 2016, the broadcasters were funded partially from the state budget, augmenting a monthly licence fee<sup>3</sup> collected through electricity bills. This solution, theoretically meant to be temporary, was extended for the next two years, causing uncertainty about the future financing of RTS and RTV.

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<sup>2</sup> Irena Drca (2018) Povećanje takse za javni medijski servis, Pravni Portal, 20 December, [www.pravniportal.com/povecanje-takse-za-javni-medijski-servis](http://www.pravniportal.com/povecanje-takse-za-javni-medijski-servis).

<sup>3</sup> In the Law the licence fee paid by receiving sets owners is called tax ('RTV taksa') and shall not be confused by the funding model from the state budget which comes from citizen's taxes.

Article 35 of the Law on Public Service Media stipulates that a stable revenue stream is a precondition for the independence and institutional autonomy of this kind of media. Ever since the beginning, however, public service media were facing a steady erosion of earnings expected from the licence fees. Before the Law on Public Service Media was amended, only one-third of the total licence money (at that time the fee was 1.10 Euro per month) could be collected. Currently, the monthly fee amounts 220 RSD, equivalent to almost two Euro. From the income in the territory of Vojvodina, 30 percent is apportioned to RTS, the remainder to RTV. In the rest of Serbia, the monthly fees go to the RTS only. This source of income is far from being sufficient to cover the ever-growing production costs, however. This was the reason that, in 2016, both public service broadcasters were granted an additional 4 billion RSD (approx. 35 million Euro) from the state budget. The same financial subvention was provided in 2017 and 2018. The contribution from the state budget amounted to a total 80 million Euro, in other words.<sup>4</sup> According to the president of the RTS Managing Board, 54 percent of current RTS income comes from fees, 23 percent from the state budget, and 23 percent from advertising revenue (6 minutes of ads per hour are allowed both on TV and on the radio) and sponsorships.<sup>5</sup>

One of the fundamental prerequisites for the independent and autonomous status of the public service media is the transparency of its business operations. The outflow of expenditures is not transparent enough, considering that the money being spent is public money and accountability to the citizens is therefore in order. It is obvious that the government is trying to maintain influence over the public broadcasting system through its financial aid. RTS management is of the opinion that their future strategy must entail a gradual decrease of financial support from the state.

The Law that determines the public service media's status, mission, and work stipulates an obligation to serve the public interest, to meet the needs of the audience, and to be fully accountable to the citizens. Article 15 of the Serbian Law on Public Information and Media (2014) stipulates eight criteria that public service media must conform to in the interest of the public. The requirements call for the protection of children and cultural identity, education

<sup>4</sup> Danas (2019) Može li javni servis biti nezavisan ako dobija pare iz budžeta?, 25 March, [www.danas.rs/ekonomija/moze-li-javni-servis-biti-nezavisan-ako-dobija-pare-iz-budzeta](http://www.danas.rs/ekonomija/moze-li-javni-servis-biti-nezavisan-ako-dobija-pare-iz-budzeta).

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Vuletić (2019) Vaše pravo da znate sve, Politika, 23 April, <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/427743/Pogledi/Vase-pravo-da-znate-sve>.

and ecology, public health, artistic production, protection of national and cultural minorities, and for the supportive treatment of handicapped people. The Law on Public Service Media (2014) reinforces the obligation of PSM to serve the public interest. Paragraph 7 enumerates 19 specific functions and duties. Areas of responsibility include: diversity of media content, freedom of expression of individual and public opinion, promotion of democratic values and human rights, respect to the plurality of ideas, equal treatment of all social strata without discrimination, support of the cultural identity of the Serbian people and other ethnic groups, development of media literacy, production of locally made documentaries and science programmes. The public service broadcaster in Vojvodina (RTV) is obliged to inform and promote the cultural identity of nine national minorities in their native language, via both television and radio channels. RTS has the mandate to meet the basic informational needs of national minorities outside the autonomous province. It does so by transmitting daily news programmes in Albanian and Romani.

In order to fulfil the duties mentioned above, PSM have the following resources at their disposal.

The RTS possesses ten television channels: three terrestrial (RTS 1, RTS 2 and RTS 3 – a culture and art channel) and one satellite channel, RTS SAT. After public discussion, seven cable channels were added to its system: RTS HD, a drama and movie channel, a lifestyle channel, a music channel, a folk music channel, an archive programming channel, and a children's channel. All of these broadcast 24 hours a day. RTS also has a network of 23 regional correspondent's offices, a web portal, public performances by four orchestras and three choirs, a CD music and video production branch, a book publishing house, research and documentation centres, and an extensive audio-visual archive. Since 2018, RTS additionally offers the internet platform 'RTS Planeta', streaming its own radio and TV programmes abroad. It is intended primarily to serve the Serbian Diaspora but also to attract foreign audiences. The platform is a commercial endeavour which could improve RTS earnings (its use costs 50 Euro per year).

Radio Belgrade, also a part of RTS, operates four FM channels: Radio Belgrade 1 (general interest), Radio Belgrade 2 (culture and arts programme), Radio Belgrade 3 (science and education radio), and Radio Belgrade 202 (music and entertainment). The programmes of all radio channels are gradually shifting to multimedia services, using social networks and streaming.

RTS employs 2 300 full-time and 600 part-time media workers.

The Radio Television of Vojvodina (RTV) has 1 200 employees and several hundred freelancers. It produces and broadcasts a regional programme on two television channels, RTV 1 and RTV 2. It also runs three radio channels, all of which broadcast 24 hours a day. The second TV channel is used exclusively for information programming serving ethnic minorities and promoting the culture of minorities. Editorial teams responsible for the national minorities living in Vojvodina (Hungarian, Slovak, Romanian, Ruthenian, Ukrainian, Roma, Croatian, Macedonian and Bunjevac) create the entire programme in their respective native languages. RTV also has a large concert hall – Studio M – which serves as a radio and television studio.

There is no doubt that the two public service broadcasters serve the public interest and the country's cultural needs the best. On the other hand, it is unclear that RTS and RTV alone are unable to meet all the demands stipulated by the law. Like in other countries, however, the audience enjoys its flashy carnivals of light, its trivial entertainment. At the moment, quizzes, reality show programmes, music competitions, infotainment, celebrity lifestyle reporting, etc. globally dominate commercial broadcasting channels. This is exactly the programme selection being offered by commercial broadcasters in Serbia, too. By contrast, public service media offer neither reality shows nor much other trivial entertainment. Programmes dedicated to culture, education, children, or the sciences, on the other hand, are available on public broadcasting channels only. If someone wants to watch this content, he or she must turn to the public service media. PSM channels put emphasis on broadcasting Serbian-produced content – Serbian movies, drama, series, children's programmes and cultural magazines. They are therefore involved in numerous co-productions – in order to obtain quality content, to televise theatre, dance, music, and film festivals, to support amateur culture and the arts, and so on. There does exist an audience attracted by this strategy. A significant body of research measuring TV ratings and market share shows that public service television (mostly RTS) outperforms national commercial broadcasters. It must be noted, however, that PSM mostly broadcast reruns of popular products during off-peak hours. The PSM in Serbia do this to save on production costs, in order to become sustainable.

The withdrawal of the state and local authorities from media ownership, except in terms of public service media, had dried up traditional funding sources. This created a huge void affecting all print and electronic media. The gap cannot be filled by the weak advertising market, estimated at 180 million Euro per

year. In order to support the production of content serving the public interest by broadcast media (commercial and private, local, regional, e-portals, etc.), a mechanism of state assistance called 'project financing' was introduced. Each year, the Ministry of Culture and Information launches a public tender for co-financing (up to 80 percent) of project costs for creating public interest content in the areas in which the applicants operate. The co-financing of media content creation is not always consistent with the legislative framework and often involves interference by the state administration, especially at local level. There are also problems involving the appointment of members of the evaluation committees. In 2018, 'project financing' grants valued 235 million RSD (about two million Euro) were allocated. PSM are not eligible for this kind of support.

### Relations to politics

Political and financial power brokers have always been trying to exert control over the public service media. Due to the specific mode of PSM financing in Serbia (see above), political actors have a better chance to succeed in Serbia than elsewhere. The Regulatory Electronic Media Agency – REM (former RRA) – is the starting point of institutional control. Despite the fact that the Managing Boards of the PSM are formally appointed by the independent regulatory body (REM), the government is able to interfere in the process. The REM appoints by a qualified (two-thirds) majority of votes nine members of the Managing Board of RTS and nine of the RTV after a public call. Board members serve for a term of five years and for a maximum of two terms. The Managing Board then appoints the directors general, again by a qualified majority of votes. The directors appoint editors-in-chief for different programme sectors. The institutional structure of RTS and RTV provided for programme councils that serve as consulting bodies. The members of these councils are also appointed by the Managing Board. The councils are charged with following and evaluating the effects of content delivered 'in the name of the public', but their practical impact is weak. Managing Boards and Directors make effectively all business decisions themselves. Only a few economists, media professionals or other experts are appointed to the Board, however. This additional problem indicates that the appointments process favours political operatives over individuals with actual expertise.

To ensure independence, MPs, political party functionaries and persons holding stakes in any type of media (owners, major shareholders, close relatives or owners or major shareholders, etc.) are not eligible to serve as



members of the REM or as members of the managing boards of public service media. In fact, a majority of the seats on the REM council has to be allocated to representatives of NGOs, media professionals, universities, churches, and other institutions of civil society. Still, all candidates must be approved by the parliament. The first Law on Public Information (2003) was amended several times in order to bypass the ban on installing political operatives on the REM. Originally, representatives of civil society did outnumber members installed by the government. Since the last REM council election, however, there are as many members by the government as members nominated by civil society organisations due to unequal lengths of their respective terms. The REM council functions currently with six members. Three seats are vacant. The candidates for these seats failed to receive the approval demanded by the law due to political conflict and due to machinations in the Committee for Culture and Media that forwards candidates to the parliament for approval.

The regulator continues to lack independence in monitoring broadcasters to ensure they meet their programming obligations. REM's assessment of media compliance with legislative provisions has always been delayed during election campaigns and published long time after it. It is true that all candidates receive equal time for campaign adverts both on public service radio and on television before elections. But the public is complaining about the absence of political debates and quality commentary on hot political issues both during election campaigns and in general. In the public service media's day-to-day programming, the ruling parties' representatives receive noticeably disproportionate airtime. Ruling party functionaries take advantage of the fact that they can appear in their capacity as government clerks and public servants; opposition politicians are being granted much less publicity on public service news programmes. Opposition parties are therefore criticising the public service broadcasters as being politically biased. This provokes constant political tensions and even violent acts against public service media. As a result, the current regime abuses public service media less openly because it has enough obedient commercial broadcasters and the tabloid press on its side. In sum, the information content of the public service media is dominated by the parties in power (21 percent of the broadcast time). Citizens are only main news actors in 8.7 percent and experts in 4.6 percent of the news programme time.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Jovanka Matić (2014) *Servis građana ili servis vlasti*, Beograd: Dobar naslov, p.104.

### **Adaption to new technological developments**

The first experimental, digital channel in Serbia was the public service one – RTS Digital – which started in 2008. The switchover from analogue to digital broadcasting was originally set to occur in 2012. Due to a lack of investment and political follow-through, however, the date had to be postponed several times. The switchover finally happened in July 2015 when no further delay was possible due to the ITU (International Telecommunication Union) rules. Digital signals are transmitted by terrestrial network, divided into 14 zones with three multiplexes. Multiplex 1 transmits national broadcasting channels including the public service broadcasters and covers 98 percent of the territory. Multiplex 2 serves regional and local broadcasters and covers 90 percent. Multiplex 3 handles regional and local free-to-air channels as well as to video on demand channels; it reaches 90 percent of the territory. Serbia has chosen DVB-T2 with MPEG-4 compression as its digital standard.

The public service broadcasters are adapting to changing audience preferences, especially among younger viewers. RTS and RTV make increasing use of social media and internet platforms. RTS maintains an internet portal, a Facebook page, an official YouTube channel with 15 sub-channels for different types of audio-visual content, and a Twitter account. RTS also runs 'RTS Planeta', an online platform that streams eleven television and five radio channels. RTV too has a modern internet portal, a Facebook profile, a YouTube channel with ten sub-channels, and a Twitter account. The RTV website is available in eight languages, including those of national minorities.

### **Current public debate on public service media in Serbia**

Public discussion regarding the media system in general and public service media in particular was especially heated in 2018. The reason was the adoption of the new national 'Media Strategy 2018–2023'. This process, led by a working group, was accompanied by round tables, public debates, and discussions lasting several months. The most active actors were professional journalists' associations, interest groups, and media experts. The document catalogues a number of conclusions and recommendations. Officially, the Strategy was finished in December 2018. But media representatives and journalists have been unsatisfied with final version of the document and have demanded a review of the text. EU representatives have also expressed scepticism, so the Media Strategy has still not been officially finalised.

The media strategy claims that the public service media are not yet completely fulfilling their obligations with regards to information content for socially vulnerable groups and ethnic minorities (RTS); neither completely independent nor unbiased news programmes are being offered yet. In the public discussion, objections were expressed concerning the dubious ways public money is being dispensed by the public service media. One recommendation, accordingly, is that the public service broadcasters be re-established as entities independent both politically and economically. For example, a new legal norm of has been proposed that would give the different stakeholders – civil society, experts, and employees – equal numbers of seats on the managing board. There are currently no voices asking openly for deinstitutionalisation, e.g. for privatisation of the public service media.

One of the proposals is to introduce an Ombudsman for public service media in order to increase their social accountability and transparency. In addition, together with the existing programme council, the Ombudsman could act as a proxy for the audience and their questions, complaints, and proposals.

Some commentators are suggesting the establishment of regional public service media. The regional broadcasters could be affiliated with RTS and RTV, retransmitting some of the national broadcaster's content supplementing it with additional content of their own. This proposal is inconsistent with current transition policy, which has been consistently rejecting state ownership of the media so far. Apart from the theoretical difficulties, local authorities could not afford running these new regional public service media outlets, not to mention the increased vulnerability to political interference the system would create. All in all, the proposal is legitimate but unrealistic.

The public discussion on technical aspects was focused on the planned introduction of Direct Audio Broadcasting (DAB). The switch to DAB was planned a decade ago when the digitalisation project first appeared in official state documents. Formally, DAB is still on the media strategy agenda, but the number of its supporters is constantly decreasing. Firstly, DAB is used in few countries only where the existing FM radio stations could not be upgraded. Secondly, this technology is obsolete in view of the newest digital transmission tools. The switchover would be therefore a bad investment; DAB not being expected to be economically viable. All things considered, implementing DAB in Serbia is not advisable.

## Conclusion

For the time being, the public service media in Serbia (RTS and RTV) are safe and sound. There is nobody in the country suggesting their abolishment or privatisation. These broadcasters have survived successfully a wild, post-transitional explosion of private electronic media and convergence with contemporary digital ones. They are very active in the social media space and in the online world in general, meaning they are well adapted to new patterns of media consumption on part of the general public. The public service media are able to compete with national, commercial broadcasters and even to win these battles in terms of popularity. Still, the most serious objection is that neither completely independent nor politically unbiased information content is on offer yet. The legislative package dealing with the public service media still needs to be fully implemented. At the same time, new legislative steps intending to democratise their institutional control and management are forthcoming.

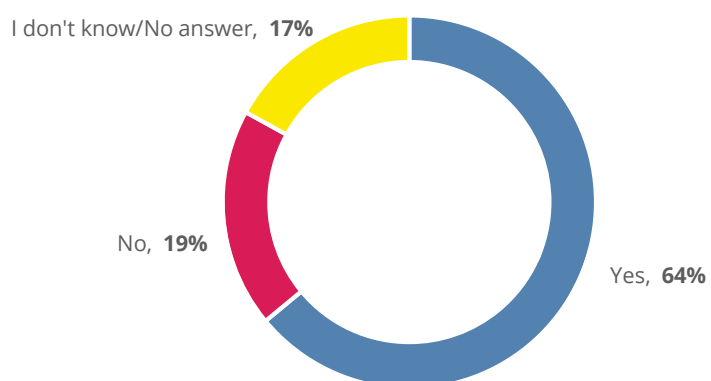
Public service media in Serbia are in the process of achieving financial sustainability. The amount of money collected in the form of licence fees is increasing and now represents more than half of the PSM's general income. With the increase in living standards, the fee can be expected to rise (to up to 500 RSD, or 4 Euro as stipulated in the Law), gradually replacing state subvention. This is in line with the Law on Public Service Media, which stipulates that stable financial revenue is a precondition for the independence and institutional autonomy of public service media. With the decrease of state financial support, public broadcasting media in Serbia would come closer to being what it is intended to be – established, financed, and controlled by the citizens. On the other hand, it is highly uncertain what radio and television will look like in the near future.



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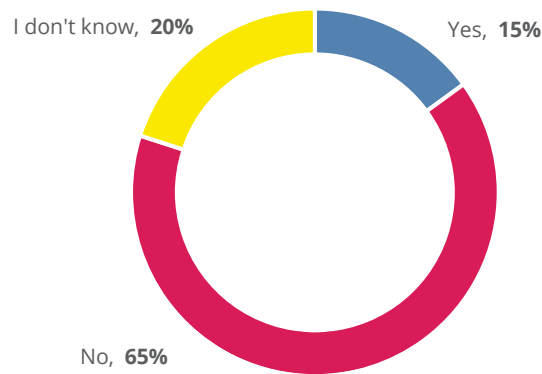
## Opinion Poll Serbia

**Chart 1: Are Public Service Media (PSM) important for democracy in your country? (Base: Total Serbian sample, in percent)**



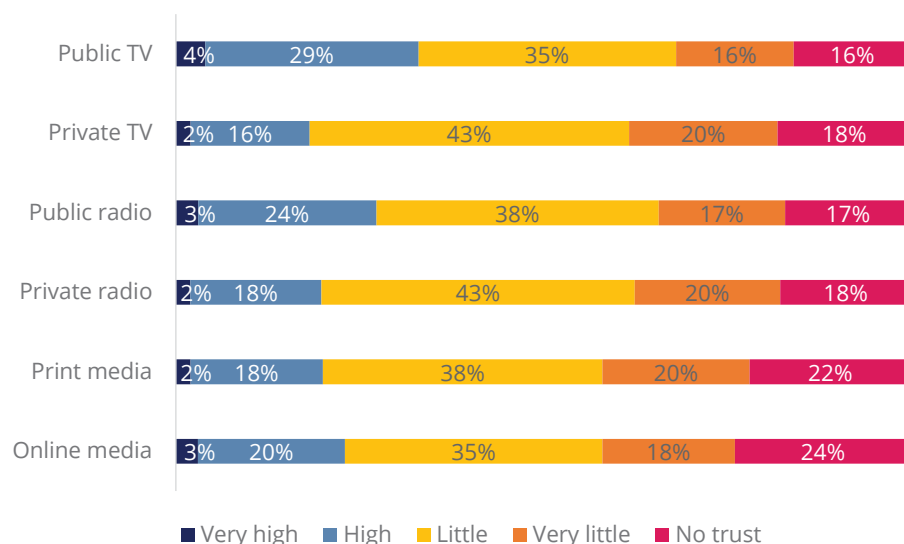
Serbian citizens (64 percent) have an average level of appreciation of the importance of PSM in their country (see Chart 1) that is similar to that of the citizens of other countries in the region (68 percent). A distinct group that shares this opinion to a larger extent are the respondents over the age of 64 years. 78 percent of them believe that PSM are important for democracy in Serbia.

**Chart 2: In your opinion, are PSM free from political influence in your country? (Base: Total Serbian sample, in percent)**



While, in general, Serbian citizens do not differ from the citizens of other countries in the region as regards to whether PSM are free from political influence – 65 percent of the total Serbian sample believe that PSM are not free from political influence (see Chart 2); there are specific demographic groups who share this attitude to a higher degree. 81 percent of Serbian citizens aged 50-64 years believe that PSM are not free from political influence, just like 80 percent of Serbians with university degrees.

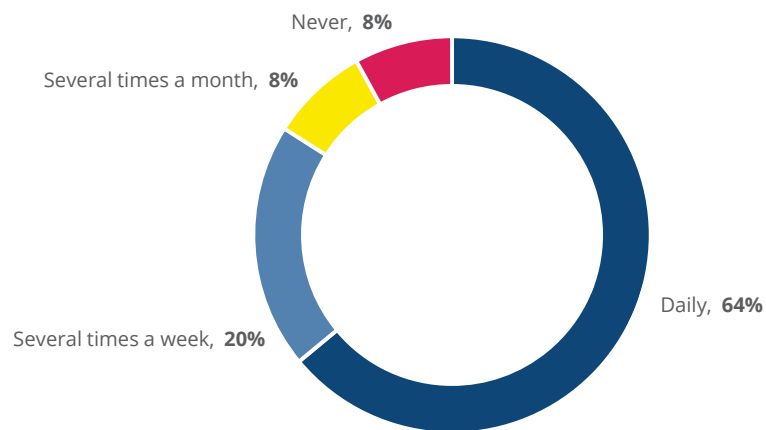
**Chart 3: How much trust do you have in following media? (Base: Total Serbian sample, in percent)**



Overall, Serbian citizens have greater trust in public service media than in their private counterparts. On average, Serbians trust public TV (33 percent) the most, followed by public radio (27 percent) and online media (23 percent) – numbers in sum. However, the greatest share of respondents who have stated that they have no trust in media (24 percent) have singled out online media (see Chart 3). A significant difference may be noticed as regards to the educational background of Serbia citizens: those with primary education trust online media the least while citizens with university education trust both public and private TV the least.

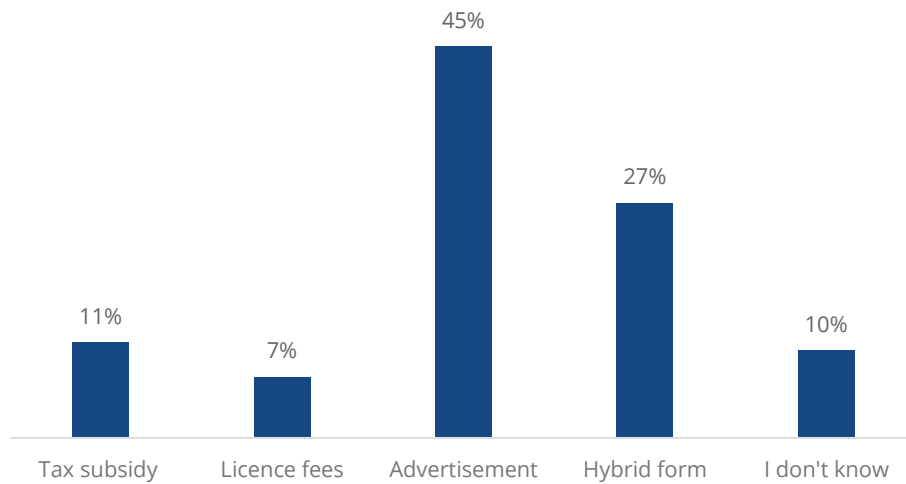


**Chart 4: How often do you use the services of Public Service Media (PSM)?**  
(Base: Total Serbian sample, in percent)



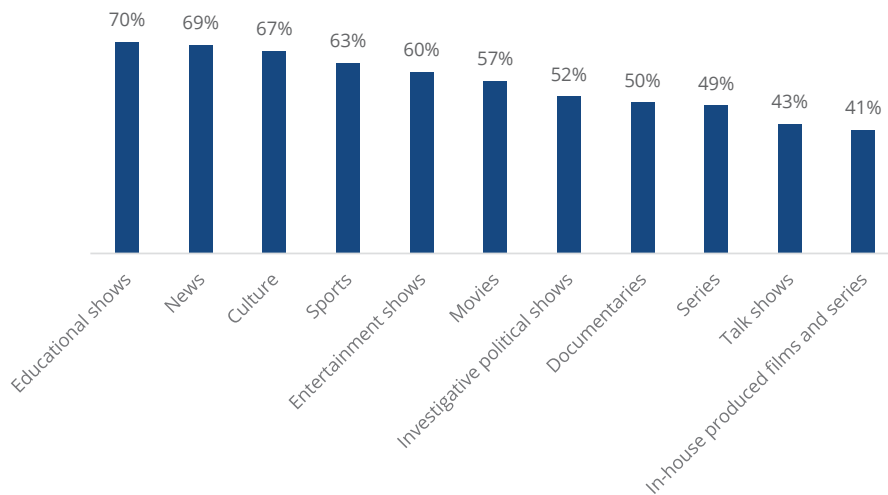
Serbia is on the list of countries where daily use of PSM is higher than the average in the region, with 64 percent of Serbians using PSM services on a daily basis (see Chart 4). Unlike other countries where PSM use is the highest among citizens in the age group 64+ years (or 50-64 years in some cases), in Serbia it is respondents in the age group 30-49 years who have the highest share of daily use of PSM (72 percent).

**Chart 5: What type of funding do you prefer for PSM? (Base: Total Serbian sample, in percent)**



Almost half of the Serbian citizens (45 percent) believe that advertising is the best funding model for PSM. The second choice is a hybrid model supported by 27 percent of respondents (see Chart 5).

**Chart 6: What kind of content should PSM present? (Base: Total Serbian sample, in percent, multiple answers possible)**



Compared to other viewers in the region, Serbian citizens would like to watch more cultural programmes, talk shows and series (see Chart 6). Expectedly, significant differences are based on the gender. Men would prefer more sport programmes (74 percent compared to 53 percent of women) while women would prefer more series (56 percent compared to 41 percent of men). Further differences are seen in the education profiles of respondents. A higher percentage of citizens with university degrees would like to see more educational programmes (81 percent) and investigative journalist programmes (65 percent).