



Media Systems of South-Eastern Europe in the Condition of Democratic Transition: The Example of Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia

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ABSTRACT

The region of South-Eastern Europe is unique in that it can demonstrate us all the stages of democratic transition, starting from the first democratic reforms in the 90s of XX century and down to accession to the European Union. The article describes the transformation occurred in the media systems of Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Serbia, and also the main results achieved in the process of democratic transition are revealed. Nowadays it is obvious that these countries face many problems during the transition. National media systems demonstrate a high degree of political parallelism and economic marginality. The South-Eastern European media are focused on covering political life, their political involvement is much stronger than in other European countries. As a result the media became an instrument of the political power, today it is hard to draw a line between political and journalistic activity. Another problem is the high level of political extremism in mass media. The article also describes the negative effects that currently hinder the integration of the media in the studied countries into the European information space. The study takes into account various domestic and external factors, influencing the development of media environment in the Balkan States.

Keywords: Media System, South-Eastern Europe, Democratic Transition, European Integration

JEL Classifications: F51, F55, F59, Z13

1. INTRODUCTION

Today the Central and Eastern Europe region is an object of steady fast attention of media researchers. Countries of the region are bound by similar historical development, totalitarian past and a phased transition to political systems based on the principles of democracy. The region is unique in that it has demonstrated almost all stages of democratic transition, starting from the first reforms, which were held at the turn of 80s and 90s of XX century and to the integration into a common European space, the main step of which is considered to be the European Union (EU) accession. The national media have played an important

role at all stages of transition, their gradual transformation and continued functioning as a democratic institution have testified to the democratization degree of the society and the efficiency of implemented reforms. Along with that, for over 20 years, within which the process of democratic transition continues, the significant differences were noted in the way the countries pass through it. Central Europe, for example, has completed its path of accession to the EU, integrated into the European political, economic and cultural space much earlier, and went to the Western path of development. Poland is traditionally considered the leader of democratic transition, while the Polish media are characterized by a high level of independence according to the reports made

by organizations that conduct researches in the field of media. It became obvious, that in South-Eastern Europe the democratization process is slower, and countries face a number of obstacles to their political and economic integration into the EU (Irión and Jusic, 2013). Definitely, it is connected with the increased instability of the region, and military and political conflicts, which took place in the last decades. In addition, the level of economic development of these countries became another deterrent to the EU accession. Practically all the countries are multicultural in this region; therefore the consolidation of ethnic groups and their domestic integration became an important stage in the democratic transition. Lastly, an important feature of the region is the fact that the process of transition and integration into the European order is not completed yet in some countries, and the EU accession is the prospect of further development (Jebril et al., 2013).

Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Serbia are a part of the South-East region; these countries have a similar historical development, related political systems, approximately identical level of economic development, and they are located on a comparatively small territory, and mostly are multicultural. At the same time Albania, Macedonia and Serbia are not members of the EU to date, although they received the status of candidates for membership, but Bulgaria became the EU member in 2007. Thus, these countries are an example we can use to consider the separate stages of democratic transition, reveal similarities and differences in the development of countries, investigate the functioning of the national media as a democratic institution (Jakubowicz and Sükösd, 2008). This study is able to reveal the integration level of the region into a common European space and prospects for its further development.

In the conditions of democratic transition the media systems of countries of South-Eastern Europe were subjected to the major transformation. A political approach, which was decisive for the development of national media before the transition, was changed on the market approach already after the first democratic reforms. Formally, the political approach was based on public interest, but public interest was determined solely by the ruling party. The dominance of market approach became a necessary condition for the spontaneous emergence of competitive media market (Voltmer, 2013). The implemented reforms have also opened borders to the foreign capital inflows, new media systems were created exclusively with the involving of foreign investment and with the borrowing and adapting of Western practices. The fall of totalitarian regimes and the rise to power of democratically oriented political forces led to the new media segment formation, so-called “free press,” which, essentially, represented a certain hybrid of Western formats and national traditions. The market approach marked a new period in the development of states and national media. Now, public interest was viewed already from the standpoint of audience needs. In this regard, entertaining formats are becoming dominant in the media, and the number of audiovisual media, which broadcast those formats, increases significantly.

Today we can observe an attempt of the states to form a new social approach as applied to the media development. It is expressed in

the legislative support of public media, the aspiration to expand the sector of quality press, the intention to redirect the public interest and increase the audience’s media literacy level. However, today that intention faces a number of difficulties, among which are the polarization and bias of media, which are increasingly becoming a tool of political and nationalist forces (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; King, 2010).

2. METHODS

Considering the history of media development of countries of South-Eastern Europe in conditions of democratic transition, two important features can be noted. On the one hand, the media became a significant force in the process of transition to democratic regimes. On the other hand, the democratization occurred in the media sector itself, and the media took a fundamentally new path of development. The natural course of the process revealed some contradictions, which are easily detectable today. It is assumed that the higher the degree of country integration into the European space, and the more national regulations are synchronized with the European legislation, the more effective the national media that act as a guarantor of democracy should operate. At the same time, currently the opposite tendency is observed. In Bulgaria, which is a member of the EU, the political bias of the media is observed more often, while in Albania and Serbia, for which on the formal grounds the process of democratic transition is not completed yet, a steady increase in the Print Media Freedom Index is observed according to the international organizations (Reporters Without Borders, 2014). So, the key factors, which influence the development of national media, their degree of independence, their level of integration into the European information space, cause our interest. Since national media do not develop in isolation and are a part of the global transformation process of political and social systems, such a study is able to reveal the degree of democratization and integration into the European realities for the countries of South-Eastern Europe as a whole, and also to reveal the major obstacles and constraints on their path.

The study methods are based on the integrated approach, which includes: A comparison of democratic transition in Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia; analysis of political, economic and cultural development of countries in the transition period; and a comparison of national media systems in terms of their compliance with the Western European media. Thus, the analysis is performed on the following parameters: Political order, ethnic composition, religious composition, characteristic of the national media systems, freedom index of national media.

The study relies on the documents and reports of international organizations, studying the functioning of European media sphere (South East European Media Observatory, 2014), and analyzing the development of regional societies (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). When analyzing, we take into account the current political situation, diverse business interests, political extremism degree, nationalism tendencies manifested in the mass media of studied countries.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Albania

3.1.1. Political order

Albania is a parliamentary republic. Since 2008 it is a member of NATO, in 2009 the country officially expressed its desire to become member of the EU, in 2014 received the status of candidate country.

Albania has a multiparty system, however, to date we can distinguish two major parties that define the political and social development of the country: Socialist Party of Albania (a center-left political force, since 1991 is the successor of the sole party in the country with the existence of communist regime – Albanian Party of Labor) and Democratic Party of Albania (a center-right party of conservative wing was established in 1990, since its formation until the present time is the largest opposition force). Until 1997, the Democratic Party was in the majority in the Parliament of Albania and promoted democratic reforms in the country. Those political forces are constantly in a state of political competition and alternately replace each other in power.

In 1997 the most powerful economic crisis broke out in the country. That was due to the collapse of the so-called “financial pyramids,” and then a wave of protests, rallies and strikes passed across the country. In the south of the country the rallies degenerated into the uprising, after that the President of Albania, Sali Berisha, was forced to declare national emergency. Fearing the third wave of refugees from Albania, the UN host the 7000th contingent of troops in the country up to the stabilization of political and social life. As a result the elections were called, which the Socialist Party of Albania won. At the next election in 2001 the Socialist Party also gets the majority of seats in Parliament. At the election in 2005 the situation changed, and already the Democratic Party of Albania forms the government. In 2009 the Democratic Party of Albania again won the election and formed a coalition with the Socialist Movement for Integration, and in the same year the country joined the NATO. Already in the first decade of the XXI century it becomes obvious that the country is facing serious challenges on its path to the European integration. First of all it is due to the weak development of economy, which is dominated by the agricultural sector.

In 2013 the next parliamentary elections were conducted. Shortly before that, the European Commission stated that the reception of official status of candidate country by Albania for the membership in the EU depends on, whether the election will be conducted in strict compliance with the European democratic standards or not. That position was justified, since the inconsistencies with those standards have already taken place in the past. The Democratic Party of Albania, for example, was accused of ballot-rigging at the election in 1996 in order to keep the political power that as a result almost brought the country to a civil war.

At the parliamentary elections in 2013 the Socialist Party of Albania won, and the Democratic Party went into opposition.

The tendency of coming to power of the socialist forces is typical for the region in general at the turn of first two decades of the XXI century. Definitely, this is due to the incomplete implementation of the democratic reforms, the weakening of national economies and, as a consequence, the increasing nationalist sentiments.

3.1.2. Ethnic composition

The Albanians – 82.6%, the Greeks – 0.9%, other – 1%, not identified – 15.5% (CIA, The World Factbook, 2011).

3.1.3. Religious composition

Muslims – 56.7%, Catholics – 10%, Orthodox Christians – 6.8%, atheists – 2.5%, Bektashi – 2.1%, other – 5.7%, not identified – 16.2% (CIA, The World Factbook, 2011). Based on the data it can be summarized that Albania is a mono-national country; on the distribution of religious affiliation it is obvious that the population is divided into two large groups (Muslims and Christians). It is important to remember that the religious affiliation in the Balkan States is essential, and the separation into “us” and “them” takes place in this region, namely, along the religious lines, more frequently than in other European countries.

3.1.4. Characteristic of the national media system

In the early 90s of XX century the media system of Albania suffers a radical transformation, the liberalization of media market leads to the massive emergence of democratically oriented press and entertainment publications, and the appearance of commercial broadcasting companies. The Albanian Radio and Television remain under the state control, but the attempts to reduce the degree of state influence and to reformat the program policy are taken in order to bring it closer to the model of European public media. Media freedom is regarded mainly as a freedom of market and business activities, and as a result the number of commercial broadcasting companies is increasing. The process of Europeanization of the media is expressed in the borrowing and adapting of Western standards for programming and regulation of the media in respect to the national realities.

As in many post-totalitarian countries, the transformations and reforms in the audiovisual sector of Albania occurred chaotically, without precise juridical frameworks, and as a result there was a sharp increase in the number of unlicensed commercial broadcasters. Since the reforms were implemented initially in an absolutely unregulated environment and in the absence of special media legislation, until 1995 the Albanian State Radio and TV hold a monopoly in the media market. The situation changed only after 1995, when the commercial television company TV Shijak started broadcasting in the country. By the early 2000s, the quite wide network of commercial television and radio broadcasting was formed in the country. Gradually, the foreign capital began to appear in the national media sector. Thus, in the field of print media the German publishing group “WAZ-Mediengruppe” and Italian group “Edisud Group” became the leaders. An important stage was the introduction of a ban on the ownership of commercial broadcasting companies for political parties, religious groups and state organizations at the legislative level.

3.2. Bulgaria

3.2.1. Political order

Bulgaria is a parliamentary republic. Since 2004 it is a member of NATO, since 2007 - a member of the EU.

Bulgaria has a multiparty system. Traditionally, one of the most significant political forces is the Socialist Party of Bulgaria, which is the direct successor of the Communist Party of the totalitarian epoch, and for today is characterized by a social-democratic orientation.

In the early years of democratic transition the Union of Democratic Forces played a significant role in the political life of the country, and, namely, this party became the driving force of democratic reforms. Today, however, it lost its former influence. Its place was taken by a new political alliance, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (called GERB in Bulgaria), established in 2006. The political party GERB was formed under the auspices of the former mayor of Sofia and the present Prime Minister of the country, Boyko Borisov, on the basis of municipal organization "GERB." The party positions itself as a center-right conservative union and consistently advocated for the development and strengthening of civil society of Bulgaria and the "European way" of country development.

Another significant political force is the movement for rights and freedoms (MRF) party, which positions itself as a liberal centrist union, and, in fact, is the party of the Turkish ethnic group and supported by the representatives of Turkish minority and the Muslims of Bulgaria.

During the last decade of the XX century the Socialist Party of Bulgaria and the Union of Democratic Forces, which were considered the main competitors in the parliamentary election, played a major role in the political life of the country. In late 1996 - early 1997 a serious political and economic crisis occurred in Bulgaria. In February 1997, under the influence of hyperinflation the majority of Bulgarians lost their savings, and from that moment a wave of protests passed across the country. Unable to withstand the pressure, the ruling coalition, which was headed by the Socialist Party, resigns. The time of official government was appointed, after that the right political forces led by the Union of Democratic Forces won in the election.

By the beginning of the XXI century it becomes clear that the overcoming of crisis consequences requires broader reforms and system solutions. In parliamentary election in 2001 the conservative political party National Movement for Stability and Prosperity (NMSP) led by the last Bulgarian king Simeon Saxe-Coburg Gotha, who at that time came back to Bulgaria and became actively involved in the political life of the country, won. After the election in 2005 the NMSP is included into ruling coalition together with the Socialist Party of Bulgaria and the Turkish minority party MRF. During this period the country enters in the NATO and the EU.

At the same time economic instability is growing in the country. Consequences of the global economic crisis of 2008 felt well

in Bulgaria, on a wave of popular discontent to the power a relatively young political party - GERB, which initiates a new wave of reforms in the economic and social spheres, comes and calls for the further integration into the European space. Though the country has no significant difficulties with the external debt servicing or a serious budget deficit, in 2013 a new economic crisis, caused by the high level of unemployment in the country and poverty of the population, broke out. Very quickly the economic crisis has provoked a political crisis, and the country was covered by another wave of protests, which lasted for a total of about 2 years. The government led by the GERB party resigned, and the new elected government was led by the Socialist Party of Bulgaria and the party of the Turkish minority MRF. Right at this time the various nationalist parties and associations are gaining strength in Bulgaria; a brilliant representative of them is the ATTACK party, which opposes the "colonialism" and stands for the independent country development, and also against the poverty, unemployment and corruption. Moreover, the party consistently opposed the Turkish community, living on the territory of Bulgaria, as well as for the withdrawal from the NATO and the EU. In recent years the party gained more than 10% of votes in the parliamentary election, indicating the presence of disintegrational sentiments among the citizens of the country.

The last parliamentary election was held in 2014, and the GERB party won, and also the nationalist coalition, the Patriotic Front, and the party, Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV), entered to the Parliament. The growing popularity of nationalist parties is related with the strengthening of political extremism in the country.

3.2.2. Ethnic composition

Bulgarians – 76.9%, Turks – 8%, Gypsies – 4.4%, Russians, Armenians, Vlachs – 0.7%, other – 10% (CIA, The World Factbook, 2011).

3.2.3. Religious composition

Orthodox Christians – 59.4%, Muslims – 7.8%, other – 1.7%, atheists – 3.7%, not identified – 27.4% (CIA, The World Factbook, 2011). It is obvious that the majority population of Bulgaria is the ethnic Bulgarians, but there are also two large ethnic communities – the Turks and Gypsies. If the Turks play a significant role in the political life of the country, the Gypsies are less integrated into the State life. It is for that reason during the preparation for accession to the EU a number of programs aimed at the deeper internal integration of that ethnic group (related to the education, employment, and social security) has been launched.

3.2.4. Characteristic of the national media system

The profound political changes in the Bulgarian society that took place in the 1990s, respectively, led to the transformation of the media. The first step in this direction was made in 1991, when the new Constitution of Bulgaria was adopted. It guaranteed the right to speech and freedom of information. With the restoration of multiparty system the number of periodical publications has increased sharply. The opposition press and private publications came out, and, shortly afterwards, the first commercial radio

and television stations appeared. In November 1998 the basic regulatory framework in the field of mass media was formed, and the new law on radio and television was approved. The way to the penetration of foreign capital was opened, the German publishing group WAZ-Mediengruppe became one of the leaders in the press market, and it left the Bulgarian media market in 2010.

In the field of audiovisual media the state companies, Bulgarian National Radio and Bulgarian National Television (BNT), were transformed into the public media, however, to date a significant influence from the state can be traced. With the emergence of the first commercial television companies “BTV” (previously was owned by the News Corporation, since 2010 – the property of the Bulgarian media holding “Media Group Bulgaria”) and “NOVA TV” (since 2008 - owned by a Swedish media corporation “Modern Times Group”), the television industry has undergone the major transformation, and the BNT has lost its leading position in the media market. Also the regulatory authority of audiovisual media was established, the Council of Electronic Media has become so. After the transition for digital broadcasting in 2013 the Council solely regulates all the administrative, technical and financial issues, and the sector of audiovisual media became one of the most liberal. At the same time, a high concentration of ownership in the sphere of print and audiovisual media became one of the major obstacles to their autonomy.

3.3. Macedonia

3.3.1. Political order

Macedonia is a parliamentary republic. Since 2005 it's a candidate for accession to the EU and the NATO. The procedure for the country's accession to the international organizations slowed down due to the long-standing dispute between Macedonia and Greece about the name of the first (due to the fact that the northern region of Greece is also called Macedonia), and due to the poorly developed economy and inconsistencies with European standards in elections (we have in mind the protests and disorders during the parliamentary election in 2008).

Considering the historical development of Macedonia it should be noted that the country became independent only in the XX century. Before that it was sequentially a part of the larger powers, including as a part of the Bulgarian Kingdom, the Ottoman Empire, and Yugoslavia. The country gained the independence in 1991.

In the political life of the country the VMRO-DPMNE party (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) is leading. The VMRO-DPMNE considers itself the successor of the revolutionary organization VMRO, which fought for the independence of Macedonia from the Ottoman Empire, Yugoslavia, and Greece. The VMRO-DPMNE identifies itself as the Christian Democratic Party and calls for accession of Macedonia to the NATO and the EU. At the same time the party's aspirations are clearly seen; the party considers the country's accession to the NATO as a guarantee of preservation of its national integrity.

The second significant political force is the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, which was formed in 1991 on the basis of

the Communist Party of Macedonia. For today the Union stands for the European integration of the country. Since 1991 until 2006 the VMRO-DPMNE and the Social Democratic Union competed in the parliamentary elections; since 1992 until 1998 the government was led by the Social Democratic Union, in 1998 the VMRO-DPMNE returned to the power, but in the election in 2002 the Social Democrats won again.

The turning point came in 2008, when the first early election in the history of the independent state was held. The votes' majority was received by the VMRO-DPMNE party, which formed the coalition “For Better Macedonia.” In the elections in 2011 and 2014 the VMRO DPMNE managed to retain a majority of seats in the Parliament. One of the major problems that should be solved by the Government was to ensure the stability in the multiethnic state.

3.3.2. Ethnic composition

Macedonians – 64.2%, Albanians – 25.2%, Turks – 3.9%, Gypsies – 2.7%, Serbians – 1.8%, other – 2.2% (CIA, The World Factbook, 2002).

3.3.3. Religious composition

Orthodox Christians – 64.7%, Muslims – 33.3%, Christians – 0.37%, other and not identified – 1.63% (CIA, The World Factbook, 2002). Macedonia has a rather high percentage of Albanians living in the country, and this is one of the key features that determine the course of political and social lives in the country. At the end of XX - the beginning of XXI century a certain tension between the individual ethnicities was observed, but that, in principle, was a quite natural reaction to the Kosovo conflict.

3.3.4. Characteristic of the national media system

Since Macedonia is a multiethnic state, it is quite natural that development of the national media occurs in light of that feature. Today the market of press belongs to the sphere of self-regulation and is represented by three large groups of publications – in Macedonian, Albanian and Turkish languages. Such a situation contributes to the creation of more favorable climate for dialogue between the different ethnic groups within the state. On the other hand, the increased political bias of the media was noted in recent years.

In 1993 the Parliament of Macedonia created the public television and radio broadcasting company – the Macedonian Broadcasting, which is currently controlled by the government. The first commercial television and radio companies appeared in the media market of the country in 1991-1992. Reforms in the field of broadcasting continues to date, the Macedonian media are trying to cooperate with the International Commissions, in order to maximally reduce the ethnic tensions, which in 2001 led to the armed conflict with the local Albanians. If in the 1990s, the media often were used as a weapon to incite the ethnic and religious hatred; today there is an attempt to turn them into a platform for dialogue. A positive aspect was the emergence of commercial television and radio companies that broadcast not only in Macedonian, but also in Albanian and Turkish languages.

3.4. Serbia

3.4.1. Political order

Serbia is a parliamentary republic. Since 2012 Serbia officially acquired the status of a candidate country for membership in the EU. The acquisition of given status was an important step in the country development. Since 90s of the XX century Serbia was considered responsible for the majority of military and political conflicts in the Balkan Peninsula, so the gradual integration into the European space in the course of negotiations on accession to the EU is able to affect positively the development of democratic institutions in the country. The relations with the Republic of Kosovo became a certain point of contradictions, and although Serbia wasn't demanded to recognize officially the independence of Kosovo, nonetheless, the recommendations to start a dialogue between them were announced. For the same reason Serbia complies with the military neutrality and doesn't seek the membership in the NATO. On the one hand, the country retains a memory of the NATO's bombing attacks in 1999, on the other - an obligatory condition for accession to NATO membership is the recognition of Kosovo's independence. Serbia has refused to recognize the *de jure* sovereignty of the Republic of Kosovo, but all the same in April 19, 2013 it signed an Agreement on the normalization of relations.

A significant player on the political arena of Serbia is the Democratic Party, which identifies itself as a center-left, social democratic and social liberal force. In 2008 the coalition government of radicals and democrats collapsed, cause of the conflict was the disagreement on the Kosovo issue. Radicals called on the Government to cease the diplomatic relations with the USA and to express more harshly its position on the secession of Kosovo. The Democrats called for the restraint, because they were the supporters of the European integration of Serbia. In May 2008, the early parliamentary election was held in the country, wherein a coalition of "For a United Serbia" led by the Democratic Party won. The Socialist Party of Serbia joined the coalition after the lengthy negotiations.

In 2012 the situation in the Serbia's political life changed, in the parliamentary elections victory was gained by a coalition of "Serbia Movers," which driving force behind was the Progressive Party. The leader of the political sphere of Serbia is the Serbian Progressive Party, which identifies itself as a center-right conservative force, and consistently calls for the preservation of the territorial integrity of Serbia, stable economic and social country development, observance of rights of ethnic minorities, approval of Serbia's special role of an intermediary between East and West and for the preservation of military neutrality in the event of a conflict between the NATO and Russia. The party was founded in 2008, following the split of the Serbian Radical Party, and its moderate wing formed the Progressive Party. Gradually, the party was transforming into a central opposition force, and in 2012 it formed the government of Serbia. In the early parliamentary election in 2014 the Progressive Party as a part of the bloc "We believe in the future" scored the highest number of votes and retained its power. The bloc also included the Social Democratic Party of Serbia, "New Serbia," the Serbian Renewal Movement and the Socialist Movement.

3.4.2. Ethnic composition

Serbians – 83.3%, Hungarians – 3.5%, Romanians – 2.1%, Bosnians – 2%, other – 5.7%, not identified – 3.4% (CIA, The World Factbook, 2011).

3.4.3. Religious composition

Orthodox Christians – 84.6%, Catholics – 5%, Muslims – 3.1%, Protestants – 1%, atheists – 1.1%, other – 0.8%, not identified – 4.5% (CIA, The World Factbook, 2011). After the secession of Kosovo the vast majority of the population is the ethnic Serbians, by the religious affiliation – Orthodox Christians. Gradually, the new realities led to a decrease in the ethnic tension, and now it's possible to undertake the democratic reforms in Serbia with greater effectiveness and to achieve greater independence of democratic institutions in the country.

3.4.4. Characteristic of the national media system

At the beginning of the democratic transition in the territory of former Republic of Yugoslavia, due to the multicultural composition and the Federal Constitution, a more liberal media system, which included a large number of print publications and a wide variety of regional and local TV stations, was established. The Yugoslav television also broadcasted a lot of Western programs in the original language with subtitles. In the 1990s, after the collapse of Yugoslavia, the press gradually moved into the self-regulation sector. It was leading to its spontaneous development, and along with the politically influenced media the opposition journalism appeared, and increased the sector of ethnic minorities press. As for the audiovisual media, most of them were under State control in the 90s of XX century and served the authoritarian government of Slobodan Milosevic. Despite the difficult political situation, some of the media defected to the opposition, relying on the political and financial Western support. It is ironic that the Milosevic's authoritarian government showed no interest in the hundreds of new commercial broadcasters as long as they offered the low-quality entertainment programs to the politically disoriented population instead of actual news releases. Only after the political regime was changed in 2000, the cardinal changes occurred in the media policy of Serbia, after that the State broadcasters of Serbia lost their leading position in the media market.

Further development of the media of Serbia went according to the Western path, the print media market was reformatted with the participation of German publishing group WAZ-Mediengruppe, and the most publications transferred to the tabloid format. In order to support the media independence in Serbia a special financial support was established in the form of subsidy, at which fifty state and public institutions provide annually a quota on the independent media development amounting to 15 million Euros. However, as noted by the Serbian Council for Combating Corruption, the cases were found out, when the funds went to the media, whose ownership is quite difficult to figure out. The corruption in the media field reached the serious sizes in Serbia, and that is why the struggle against it was initiated at the state level. It should be noted that that initiative gave a positive result, because during the last few years, as rated by the international organization reporters without borders, the media freedom index has increased

Table 1: Characteristics of the National Media Systems (Irion and Jusic 2013)

Country	Regulator	State/public media	Commercial media	Journalism organizations
Albania	National council for radio and TV	Albanian radio and television	TV Klan	Albanian media institute
Bulgaria	Council for electronic media	Bulgarian national radio and television	BTV, nova TV	Bulgarian media Union
Macedonia	Broadcasting council	Macedonian television and radio broadcasting	Channel 5	Macedonian institute for media
Serbia	Republic broadcasting agency	Serbian television and radio broadcasting	TV B92	Serbian center for investigative journalism

significantly in Serbia (Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index, 2014).

In the audiovisual media sector the state broadcasting transformed into the public broadcaster, while the state influence continues to persist, though. During the last decades the television company TV B92, which initially positioned itself as the independent media and was part of the opposition to the authoritarian regime of Milosevic, is very popular (Tables 1 and 2).

4. DISCUSSION

Thus, we can summarize that by the early 2000s, Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia have developed a well-defined algorithm for the transformation of national media systems, their development takes place according to the European model, which is characterized by (Irion and Jusic 2013): Differentiation of media legislation in which the press moves to the sector of self-regulation and audiovisual media moves to the sector of close regulation; compliance with local laws of audiovisual media, which is controlled by an independent supervised body, which is a public organization formally and in practice, independent of political power and media industry; establishment of dual media systems consisting of public and commercial media.

It should be emphasized that the European model is being implemented in accordance with national realities. It is known that today financial stability is the key factor to determine the status of any state in the world. A kind of arc of financial instability on the European continent stretches from Portugal through Spain, Italy and Greece. This area also includes the states of the Balkan Peninsula. Of course, financial instability has a direct effect on the political and social environment, as well as the efficiency of the functioning of democratic institutions, which is the media.

Let us first consider the similarities. Dr. of Political Science Andrzej Nowosad (Institute of Journalism and Public Communications, Krakow) explores the media systems of the Balkan states, based on the work of Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (Hallin and Mancini, 2012). As a result, he concludes that the Bulgarian media system is somewhat similar to the Russian model, yet in the end he relates it to the Mediterranean model of polarized pluralism, which includes the media of Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal. If we consider the similarity of the political systems, ethnic and religious composition of Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia, a similar path of economic development and general problems of the region, as well as similarities in the reform of the national media and their

Table 2: Media freedom index (source: Reporters without borders)

Years	Albania	Bulgaria	Macedonia	Serbia
2012	96	80	94	83
2013	102	87	116	63
2014	85	100	123	54

level of independence, we can conclude that the media of the studied region can be correlated with the Mediterranean model of polarized pluralism (Nowosad, 2014).

It is known that the Mediterranean model originated in states that entered the path of democratization in the 70-s of XX century, after a long period of dictatorship (Greece, Spain, Portugal) and that are characterized by political heterogeneity and related conflicts on ideological grounds (Spain and Portugal) (Hallin and Mancini, 2012). According to the listed criteria it is possible to include in the model the states of South-Eastern Europe that followed the path of democratization 20 years later, in the 90-s of XX century. An important feature of this model is the fact that in the past the national media were addressed primarily to elites and did not enjoy strong demand from society. It is for this reason that the public interest was determined by artificial means, by those political elites who set the course of development of the state and society.

Today it becomes evident that a democratic transition in Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia has not been completed. This is evidenced by an unstable political situation in the region and the desire of countries to find outside support. As a rule, the condition of the national media, the degrees of democratization, independence from political or business elites are a direct projection of the condition of society. Currently, there is a high degree of economic marginalization and political parallelism in the media sphere of these countries. National media is focused on the coverage of political life, and the external (structural) pluralism, traditions of commenting journalism and political engagement of the media is much stronger than in other European countries. Balkan media often becomes instruments of power (whether political parties or economic agents), a major problem is the lack of a clear line of separation between the political and journalistic activities. The situation is formed in such way also because of the high level of corruption in the countries of South-Eastern Europe. According to the international organization Transparency International, the highest level of corruption is in Albania (110 out of 175), then goes Serbia (78 out of 175), Bulgaria (69 out of 175) and Macedonia (64 out of 175). Therefore, on the agenda there is inevitable question of the functions that perform the media in the region (Transparency International, The 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index 2014).

Analyzing data from different international organizations, it can be concluded that there is rather contradictory situation. On the one hand, the statistics shows that in Albania and Serbia the level of corruption in all areas is higher than in Bulgaria and Macedonia. It is assumed that corruption is also present in the sector of the media. On the other hand, the data of the international organization Reporters Without Borders, which conducts the study of level of press freedom in 180 countries on a number of criteria, including the level of pluralism and independence of the media, the level of self-censorship, the legislative framework, transparency in matters of property, infrastructure of media, indicates the fact that over the last 3 years the level of press freedom has increased significantly in Serbia and Albania, and on the contrary, decreased in Bulgaria and Macedonia. Increase in level of media freedom in Serbia and Albania can be attributed to the fact that in these countries Ethnic composition of the population today is much more homogeneous than in Bulgaria and Macedonia, where there is a certain ethnic tension and political extremism. Also, after the resolution of the Kosovo conflict, the political life in Serbia and Albania has stabilized as a whole. In Bulgaria and Macedonia, on the contrary, there were serious political crises in 2008 and 2013. Another interesting fact is that in Serbia there is a tendency to subsidize the print media in the first place, which creates a more favorable environment for their operation and provides them with a degree of independence from financial sources. On the other hand, censorship in Serbia was modified in recent years and even distribution of subsidies can be considered today as an additional source of influence on the world of media (Lanser, 2013).

In order to trace a trend more clearly, let's consider the data of Political Capital (DEREX INDEX, Demand for Right-Wing Extremism 2014). According to the study, support for extreme right-wing political forces, and therefore a high degree of political extremism are characteristics of Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece and Romania. In Bulgaria, this trend is evident, in recent years an increasing number of votes in the parliamentary elections is gained by the nationalist party ATAKA. The statistics does not provide data about Serbia, Albania and Macedonia. However, it should be noted that the homogeneity of the ethnic composition in Albania and Serbia helps to reduce nationalist sentiment in the second decade of the XXI century. In addition, Serbia has made a significant step in this direction by signing the agreement on the normalization of relations with the Republic of Kosovo in 2013. However, in comparison with Western Europe degree of political extremism in the Balkans is much higher and in this respect much more similarities can be found with the processes that take place in Russia (Bodrunova and Litvinenko, 2013).

Of course, we should not forget that the Balkan countries are part of Europe. However, there are some objective factors that leave their mark on the way in which development takes place in these countries. Due to the fact that in South-Eastern Europe a fairly compact area is home to a very diverse ethnic composition, in some countries there is a historically hybrid society with complex structural relations. In recent decades, we have witnessed a number of armed conflicts taking place in the form of a kind of chain reaction that has affected Slovenia, Croatia,

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia. These events gave grounds for researchers to remember about such concepts as "Balkanization" and "Balkan mentality." Geopolitical term "Balkanization" was introduced in wide circulation by Congress of Berlin, the term designated a specific political process of division and fragmentation of the peoples and states of the Balkan Peninsula due to geopolitical agreements of "great powers" in the course of solving the so-called "Eastern European issue." Today, the term refers to a specific geopolitical disintegration process, which takes place on the Balkan Peninsula. Nowadays South-Eastern Europe is a region in which the probability of fragmentation of society based on ethnic or religious grounds is extremely high. From the perspective of the Balkan cultural identity, it is necessary to make a clarification to the process of "Balkanization." Ethnic nationalism and separatism, as well as all the ethnic conflicts in the Balkans, to a greater or lesser extent, are always defined by religion. All Balkan peoples perceive ethnic identity as a religious identity, i.e. they do not fix the differences between ethnicity and religion. In the Balkans, religion sets belonging to a particular ethnic group (Zagorov, 2006).

In this context, particular importance is acquired by the smooth functioning of democratic institutions, which is the media. Comparing media systems in Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia, we can conclude that today they move towards integration into the European media sector. All countries have dual media systems that operate within the legal framework in tune with EU legislation. This is quite natural, since Bulgaria is already included in the EU, while the remaining countries are candidates for membership. In this regard, countries are seeking to solve the problem of independent media funding through the introduction of subsidy for the print media. Public broadcasting has been transformed into the social, but the state's influence on the sector is quite noticeable today. Due to the lack of sufficient funding public broadcasters seriously lose to the commercial television in terms of quality and diversity of content. Due to the shortage in funding public companies have to compete with the commercial ones for advertising, which invariably affects their program policy not for the better. The conclusion is that public television today has nothing to offer to its audience. On the contrary, the impact of commercial media to an audience is quite strong that practically almost always occupy a certain position, often politically engaged, which leads to certain deformation of social and political life in general (Nikonov, 2013).

The general trend in the region is the outflow of foreign capital from the sphere of print media. In recent years WAZ-Mediengruppe left the region, unable to withstand the destructive competition in which regional economic entities try to put pressure on political elites through the media. In the field of audiovisual media presence of foreign capital is preserved, but in recent years it is possible to note a certain redistribution of property. In Bulgaria, Serbia and Albania popular commercial broadcasting companies are acquired by local holdings, which again affect the broadcasting. In general, in recent years the emphasis is put on modernization (in particular, the transition to digital broadcasting) and the production of a regional or local content using a variety of marketing technologies (Potolokova and Kuryшева, 2013).

With all the characteristics of political, economic, social and cultural realities, as well as the features of functioning of the national media systems, it is extremely important to raise the question about the functions that are currently performed by media in Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia. Are they consolidation functions, or have a place to be a function of separation and deconstruction of society? The media in the region carry out those functions paradoxically, they promote integration within certain ethnic groups, within the majority, but also lead to a significant disconnect between the different ethnic groups or political affiliation. Function of integration is performed primarily by entertaining audio-visual media, which are owned by media corporations. These broadcasting companies usually broadcast quite similar, we can say, uniform content of music and dance supersaturated with folk elements to the entire region, and thus determine the cultural values of the region (Novosad, 2014). On the one hand, it works on the integration of South-Eastern Europe, but at the same time significantly reduces the cultural level of the audience which is forced to consume low-quality, easy as possible and often vulgar content. Naturally, such integration in the framework of the Balkan Peninsula has very little to do with the integration into a common European space.

5. CONCLUSION

Having considered the political characteristics of Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia and having compared their media systems, you can draw certain conclusions. All the countries have expressed their desire to develop within the EU. In this regard, the democratic reforms were carried out, and, as a consequence, the national media were transformed. Among the results achieved in the course of reforming the following can be noted:

- Decentralization of national media systems;
- Regulation of media sector is synchronized with the EU legal regulations;
- Formation of a competitive media environment at the local, regional and national levels;
- Adaptation of Western formats;
- Audience segmentation.

However, in the process of reforming and democratization of national media systems the negative effects also were obtained, among which are:

- Lack of transparency in the field of media ownership, establishment of the so-called "dictatorship of ownership";
- Decline of editorial and financial independence of the media;
- High level of political parallelism and financial marginality;
- The mass media contribute to political, ethnic and religious antagonism;
- A question arises sharply about the national identity.

Nowadays, the issue of determining the identity is really an important problem. There are different levels of identity – ethnic (determined by the origin), national (caused by the political/state system), and cultural (refers to the global civil society). At the present time, it is important to pay attention to the formation of cultural identity namely, what, in principle, takes place in South-East Europe gradually. However, at the same time, the idea of

the essence of Balkan cultural identity is strongly distorted and simplified, and it is formed through the provision of rather doubtful content to the audience. However, such content is broadcast more than successfully and brings profits, so, most likely, that model will persist.

On the other hand, the formation of a common cultural space on the Balkan Peninsula today becomes a guarantee of future sustainable development of the region. Nowadays, the political, economic and social image of the region is negative in general; therefore, the formation of concept of a common cultural space development would allow to neutralize the negative perception of the region and to create a new, positive image of the Balkan Peninsula. An important role in the development of regional cultural space, on the one hand, and in the formation of positive image of the region, on the other hand, the mass media could play and, primarily, the on-line media.

The independence of mass media is a guarantee of the existence of an independent democracy. The mass media contribute to the promotion of values, attitudes, and social position. According to the media state you can determine the society state, and the political culture level in the country. Remzi Lani, Executive Director of the Albanian Media Institute, expressed an opinion that the Balkan media are free, but they are not independent, and as the main characteristics of the media environment in the region he called the dynamic development, chaos, abundance, defragmentation and opacity of ownership. Today, the censorship is replaced with the self-censorship, repressions – with the pressure, control - with the influence, and both from the domestic and external forces. The expert believes that the closeness of media to the political parties is quite natural, and in Albania and Bulgaria the free journalism was born out of the opposition press. However, we can easily see the attempts of political elites to restrict the media freedom legislatively, and such attempts took place to be in Macedonia, and also in Hungary and Croatia (Bulgarian National Radio 2013).

The main tasks face today the media markets of South-East Europe are their modernization, globalization, and international integration. The latter is inextricably linked with the accession to the EU. Moreover, the EU membership is a guarantee of sustainable democratic development within the single European community for those countries. However, we should not forget the role of mass media, which in its capacity as a democratic institution can influence the efficiency of electoral system, functioning of political parties, independent judiciary, civil society development, and preservation of cultural values.

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