



UPPSALA UNIVERSITY

European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratization

A.Y. 2019/2020

THE REGRESS OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN WESTERN BALKANS

An analyze of the performance on freedom of expression in Western Balkans and its impact on
European integration of those countries

Author: Denisa Caushi

Supervisor: Victoria Enkvist

Co-Supervisor: Anna Sara Lind

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to measure the performance of freedom of expression in Western Balkans and to compare if this performance goes in the same parallel level with conditionality criteria, and how influential has been the performance of this fundamental human rights on the European integration process of WB countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia). A mixed research methodology has been used in this study, through analyzing data from reports of European Commission, Reporters without Borders and a survey conducted for the purpose of this study for the period of time 2010-2020. The considerable regress of freedom of expression during 2010-2020 in Western Balkans has not been an enough factor to slow down or to limit the integration process of those countries. Through prioritizing the resolution of conflicts, EU has been allowing the progress of those countries further to integration, even though the human rights conditionality criteria has not been comply. Further studies are needed to go into deeper details for each countries on the field of press freedom, especially on the impact of media in this region on democratization and accountability in all countries of Western Balkans.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most fundamental rights in a democratic country is that of free speech. Even though, its importance is widely recognized, it is still heavily impaired in many countries and especially, with regard to this paper, in the Western Balkans region. The importance of this right is that all other rights could be seen as being derived out of it and without its existence most probably no other right can be truly enforced in a state as without its presence there are no chances of reporting or protesting on any case where injustice is present, or simply providing a differentiating opinion to that of the majority.

All five of the countries (Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) chosen to be studied in this paper are both part of the aforementioned region and in various stages of accession to the European Union, which is why they, exactly, were targeted to become part of this thesis. Kosovo, although part of the region, was left out for reasons explained later on the paper in the section titled “Methodology”. To add to them, all of the five countries are democracies in transition, where rights and freedoms are not expected to be implemented fully in force.

What this paper seeks to do is to find out how the situation has changed from the year 2010 to 2020, whether there has been progress or regress, why these developments have been happening in these countries and lastly, how the European Union’s interference has been affecting the countries in their provision of the right.

This paper is going to consist of eight parts: introduction, methodology, literature review, three chapters: one on the European Commission’s reports, the second on Reporters Without Borders reports and the last on the results gather by the survey conducted on the populations of the five countries, the conclusion and last, the one annex, which provides the format of the survey that was handed to the respondents and the full results gathered, which are going to mark the end of the paper.

The first two chapters have taken more of a theoretical approach where data was collected from all the reports that were provided and then compiled in a suchlike way to make it shorter and easier to read than to browse through all the reports one by one. The research implements a

methodology that helps it do exactly that in a short and complete way so that the information can be easily understood. Hopefully, this could be put to use by further researches in this topic that should be getting more attention due to its sheer importance. The third chapter titled “A dive into people’s thoughts” seeks to provide exactly that: a juxtaposition between the data presented by the EU and NGOs and what the people are actually experiencing, which is why a specific question on their individual fulfillment of this freedom was added, something that was not particularly addressed in the first two chapters.

This paper’s main focus is to highlight the issues that the Western Balkans countries are facing when it comes to this particular freedom and the areas where the most or, alternatively, least progress has been garnered. As such, it aims to serve as a blueprint for where the main focus in the future should be between the numerous targeted developments of the right of free speech in the five countries. The paper is constructed in such a method as to make possible the full experience starting from EU to Reporters Without Borders and ending with the people, thus understanding every level of reporting there is to be provided on this issue. These parts are carefully put together so that the differences are notable between the opinions of all three actors and the reader gathers an account of the different experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Many authors studying enlargement have demonstrated that the EU's political conditionality has had a limited impact in the Western Balkans regarding the spread of democratic values and the protection of human rights, especially if compared to the Central Eastern European states that joined the EU in 2004.”(Grimm and Mathis) Some authors support the idea that the EU should provide conditions and policies for adaptation that have a low domestic cost of adaptation because of the situation in the region itself and the ethnic conflicts left behind, by the break-up of the former Yugoslavia are a major obstacle to effective political conditionality.

One of the EU most important policies is cutting off the funds or assistance if the country does not meet the criteria; this policy is use as punishment. Nevertheless, this is not always the case, especially if we refer to the Balkans. By taking into consideration the case of Serbia, which has received the promised rewards even though it has failed to meet fundamental human rights requirements settled by EU, so the political elites are even less inclined to execute painful legal measures.

For example, Serbia is close to EU integration, it enjoys the status of a potential candidate country and it is awaiting the steps of the negotiations and despite Serbia's position, the EU has not imposed any sanctions on Serbia, although it has caused infringements on freedom of expression and media freedom. The only "measure" the EU has taken has so far has been strong criticism through words. Recently, Serbia adopted laws to protect media pluralism, but political pressure and threats against journalists are still significantly present in Serbia.

Despite all these problems, Serbia continued to open the first chapters in July 2016, and all this calls into question the consistency and credibility of the EU's human rights conditionality. We must not forget the role of the ruling elites domestic incentives, and the progress can be achieved only if the interest of these ruling classes matches with the EU demand. In addition, this is very well explained by the case of Serbia where legal measures approved on media freedom have met strong resistance from Serbian authorities to be approve.

What the author emphasizes in the essay of Serbia is the fact that EU has determined to prioritize cooperation in ICTY and the improvement of Belgrade-Pristina relations over the conditionality of compliance with human rights standards. At the same time author is highlighting that instability of relationship with Turkey is obliging the EU to have a stronger cooperation with the Balkans, so balance of security is apparently the new struggle for the EU on this region.

But another reason that EU cannot be very strict about the conditionality of human rights is the fact that some member states have a performance that is not fitting the EU standards. By having this kind of situation within the Union, the EU is limited to ask for the fulfillment of that criteria which is not even fulfilled on other countries which are part of EU

So the progress of Serbia toward the Status of member state won't have to encountered a major obstacle for as long as it improves relations with Kosovo, by being helped in the same time by factors such as: the migration crisis and the existence of Russia's threatening rights in the region. Serbia agreed to make coalition with its national interests such as improvement of its relationship with Kosovo but the real risk for Serbian authority remains implementation of free media reform because a free, independent and functioning press can limit their power.

An other author brings an overview of compliance of political conditionality over the years, by claiming that political conditionality nowadays is tougher to comply that in the past. So, Pridham emphasizes the importance of democratic standards on the EU's political conditionality by other Copenhagen criteria. According to him, it is precisely those standards that determine the fate of candidate countries in the process of opening negotiations or securing membership. "Nevertheless, he acknowledges that the Commission has been very careful about certain areas of political activity - usually considered reasonably important in democratic life - have remained outside the range of conditionality, notably, political parties and, essentially, civil society. " (Pridham, 2007)

A new approach toward political conditionality came in 2004, unlike in 1993, at the same time the roles of the Commission or other EU institutions have undergone little changes. That means that, the Council of Foreign Ministers and the European Parliament have taken a more interventionist role. But a decline in credibility on the EU and dissatisfaction in the economic and political spheres would lead to a loss of hope in the Western Balkans. This

complication of the situation led the Western Balkan states to have a personalized assessment of compliance over conditionality (which had the tendency to be harsher) by EU. (Pridham, 2007)

In a situation like this, it was obvious that the credibility of the conditions should be strengthened and for this it was thought to be used the example-setting tactic, so by being harsh with a candidate country could be used as an indicator for others behind him in the access line. The best example of this is the case of Croatia with the non-surrender of war criminals, which led to the postponement of opening negotiations. (Pridham, 2007)

All these developments led to a conditionality with a wider scope, which included many new issues but with fix procedures and stronger conditions to be met but all this got associated with a lack of security for the possibilities of enlargements. The process of political conditionality's compliance has not been complicated only by all the updates made over the years, causing harsher EU's demands and more specific but It got helped by the situation in the Western Balkan countries and political and economical developments in the region, thus facing a greater risk to fail meeting those ambitious and strong conditionality. (Pridham, 2007)

On one hand, Orlandic agrees with Pridham's view that the situation and conflicts in the region are a very important factor of complication and should be taken into account while determining political conditionality. But on the other hand, Orlandic also argues that the EU's bureaucratic, paternalistic and monolithic stance clearly shows that it does not understand the relationships among the countries of the region in any of the spheres including the political, economic, social, cultural and ethnic ones. (Orlandic,2019)

According to the author the EU is ignoring and refusing to link the integration in EU, development, the increase of democracy level, advancement into European integration process and benefits that can be gained by being an EU member state with the historically border conflicts all over the region. And those conflicts are exactly being used by the political class or ruling class on the region to block the advancement of the region towards the European family. He is arguing also that European integration is the only game on town for majority of the countries on the region (because of unfriendly relationship with other camps/countries such as Russia). Despite this fact, the EU is brining more and more conditions on the integration table

that are not even realistic to be followed by the current situation of the countries on the region. (Orlandic,2019)

Further that, he added that those approaches are going to create division of Western Balkans communities based on ethnicity and consequently a distancing effects between the countries of the region and all this will directly affect the integration of the region in the European Union and It will cause steps backward on this process. (Orlandic,2019)

I have to admit that personally, I do not agree with this observation of the author because of the case of Kosovo and Serbia, we can say that the EU has a very narrow focus on this issue because of the delicate situation that exists between those two countries. It is true that a deeper stance is needed than just making possible to set on the same table the leaders of the respective countries, but this is more related to the domestic and internal policy of these countries. While for the second point of the author, which are conditionality that override the capacities of these countries, I think it is better to join the European family later than a quick integration with defects that can cause a decrease in the credibility of the compliance of the conditions from the candidate countries and for sure way more than that.

While the Kmezić's article has concluded that the biggest problem in the region is not the lack of legislation for its implementation, and the current situation in which the region finds itself will be very difficult and not at all ready to establish a true liberal democracy. The author emphasizes the need for a more advanced study of democracy, and also analyzing the level of relations between state institutions and governance in the country. The author further pointed out not the lack of a liberal democracy but the lack of formal democracy. He bring in attention the problems in elections since the 1990s, and this according to him has been the cornerstone of the wall against democracy in the region. In his study the author was focused on media reforms, the legislative process they have gone through, and then in the reasons why they were not fully implemented or superficially implemented. The author also notes the high level of political control over the media, and how media programs are used to influence the general population to pursue personal or political interests. (Kmezić, 2020, p. 197)

The author calls the regimes in the Western Balkans as authoritarian regimes and according to him the initiatives for democratization in the region have failed. Despite this conclusion, the author came up with a way out for the region, which according to him would be

the creation of a new party which would represent the genuine interest of the majority of the population in these countries, and would ensure respect for law and independence of powers. The change of the elite is not enough for him, but the change of mindset of the people who will take power is what is seen as the solution of the puzzle in the Western Balkans. For this solution the author refers to what he calls the Macedonian Scenario. In which, Nikola Gruveski would lose in the 2016 elections where the parliamentary parties would unite against him and ensure a fair electoral process and the proper functioning of the entire structure. And all the changed practices in the rotten system of Northern Macedonia would enable the change of the system and a much more promising future towards democracy. (Kmezić, 2020, p. 197)

While the next article will focus on the effects of International Assistance in the media, and how this assistance has impacted developments in the media but also the democratic developments of the country. The article has come to one of its conclusions which is that the recommended IMA strategies are not related with the local conditions, which causes negligence in very important elements of the media (the financial situation of the media in the region is relatively small and lack of independence of media regulatory institution). Media reforms, which were also supported by the international community, had a strategic problem, mainly with sustainability and implementation. (Pickering, 2010, p. 1035)

The article concluded that all 5 countries in the region experienced a regression, and a risk appears to worsen the situation. The authors also point out that a higher scale of IMA is not directly related to improved outcomes. It is true that in those elements of the media, or institutions where IMA was more influential, there was a faster development, but on the other hand, at the moment when IMA was stopped, it was the same institutions in which the regression was to a higher degree. (Pickering, 2010, p. 1035)

The importance of political culture is not an element that could be missing from the study. IMA should be more politically cultural approachable when it is formulating media reforms so it can formulate a more realistic outcome and it can achieve the desired results. IMA is absolutely a strong driver for progress in the field of media, together with the conditionality of the European Union but if the European factor did not intervene in the right time to implement best practices in the field, local situation tends to implement a controlled media controlled which is not effective at all. (Pickering, 2010, p. 1035)

While the article on Europeanization in the Western Balkans, by referring at media freedom as an example, it states that the Copenhagen criteria coincide with the conditionality of accession, but the immediate goal for the region remains the prevention of violent conflicts. Therefore, stability cannot be achieved without the full respect for human rights and a liberal democracy. The author emphasizes that the EU gives priority to stability in the region before democratization, taking as an example the case of Serbia where the EU has made many concessions in various areas of conditionality, by giving priority to resolving the situation with Kosovo. Taking advantage of this stance, Serbia's leaders have used EU resources to achieve their short-term goals. These omissions from the EU are noticed to be not something new but something repeated and even strategic over the WB countries. The author questioned what would happen if the idea of rewards-based policy were abandoned, but research showed that this tactic would not bring higher progress. However, a backward integration would be more consequential than the strategy followed until now. (Huszka & Körtvélyesi, 2017, p. 9)

The influence of conditionality is always measured by the result achieved, so omissions are the strongest enemy of EU conditionality, and the living proof of this is current situation of media freedom. The author adds that the EU should give up on concessions on conditionality and it should seek real results in exchange for further integration, it has highlighted the broad expertise in the field of media that has not been fully taken into consideration during this period. What is noticeable at the WB is the fact that this region is not Europeanized (by adapting respect for human rights and democratization) but it is De-Europeanized. Therefore, strict adherence to conditionality would prevent the abuse of power by the governments of those countries and it would present a stronger institutional stance of EU. (Huszka & Körtvélyesi, 2017, p. 9)

Another point of concern is the development leading after membership, taking the example of Poland and Hungary, the author said that these inside challenges of the EU should be a push and not an obstacle for a stronger implementation and promotion of democracy in the WB, even this negative performance of media freedom should be addressed immediately. Overall, a successful implementation of conditionality would be called only if the opportunity of integration would be faded but this will not bring a backsliding on the respect towards human rights or the level of democratization. Because a superficial and a non-structural implementation

would be very risky in the post-accession duration as it happened in Poland and Hungary. (Huszka & Körtvélyesi, 2017, p. 9)

An immediate change that the author drew attention to is the destruction of informal structures of power that exploit ethnic and political divisions, and in some cases the promotion of national hatred as this ensures the length of their power. The stability of the region is therefore essential, but in a region dominated by ethnic minorities, a full stability cannot be achieved if respect for human rights and a liberal democracy are not ensured. Fulfilling the conditionality requires time and dedication, but above all it requires political will, so if the lack of this political will should not be accompanied by a concession on the conditionality criteria, because this threatens more than anything else stability in the region. (Huszka & Körtvélyesi, 2017, p. 9)

In conclusion, all the articles above deal with the advancement of European conditionality in the Western Balkans, and all have been resulted in the concession of conditionality criteria, on the establishment of stability over democracy, on the lack of initiatives to respect human rights and on the support of authoritarian leaders sometimes. It will be a real threat in the future if more attention is not getting addressed toward respect of fundamental human rights and promotion of democracy. (Huszka & Körtvélyesi, 2017, p. 9)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter is going to explain the research methodology on this dissertation. It is going to include the strategy of research, the research approach, methods that are being used during data collection, the process of research, how data were analyzed and the limitations of the research, which were mainly presented because of the situation on which we are living.

Research strategy

This research is a basic research, on a field that has not been taken a lot of attention recently. A lot of research papers are putting their focus on rule of law, corruption, economic market, conflict resolution in Balkans but just a few of them have been treating the level of human rights in the region. This paper was chosen to focus on this region mostly because all of the five studied countries are aspiring to become European Union member countries in their near futures, and have all embarked on their integration processes. It was chosen to be treated as a region because of their present similarities but also as it has been referred to by numerous international institutions as the Western Balkans package. It was decided not to include Kosovo on this research because Kosovo is a very young country of only 12 years of life, it is still very fragile and it is even not recognized yet by all EU countries so integration for Kosovo would require extra efforts and steps.

Mainly the EU recommendations, attention and funding goes on the rule of law and lowering the level of corruption on the countries, but it is necessary to address the question as follows: without an independent media, widely recognized as the fourth power in a democracy, can we have a truly democratic country? Therefore, as this question presents itself in our minds, it was decided to see how the media situation is, and if moving toward EU means that the country is enjoying a full respect for freedom of press/expression or if no significant changes are happening. This research is going to focus on performance of freedom of expression in Western Balkans during 2011-2020, and observing the performance of this human right in proportion with steps taken toward EU integration.

Research method

This research has been completed using a mixed method, by focusing on both of the possible methods: qualitative and quantitative. The topic of this research was aiming to focus on progress of freedom of expression/press on five countries so a mixed method would be necessary for a better outcome. Qualitative method is used on cases where the researcher does not have to cover big cases, but seeing as, on this research, the focus on each country and on a specific human right has made possible to treat it like a small piece of the whole situation. As this research was going to focus on each development of the freedom of expression, it means that it required a full description of the situation on this human rights and this can only be achieved through the usage of qualitative method. But on this research, there is not only going to be a detailed description of the situation in each country on specific years but also a comparison of countries with one another through statistical data gathered via using surveys. A mixed method has been using for this research in order to achieve a more reliable outcome, because as it is known that qualitative method is very much depended on the interpretation of the author while quantitative method has the tendency to lack the contextual approach of the field.

Research approach

The research approach on this dissertation is the inductive one, because on this research, there has at first been an observation period and then from this observation, a theory came up, based on different developments that have been happening during the research timeline 2011-2020. The inductive research approach has its own weaknesses because it may come up with quite general theories and not with a very specific one like in the case of a deductive research, but also the inductive research gives more space to the author to find out different patterns and that is why in the end it was opted as the final choice.

Data collection methods

As it is explained above, in this research a mixed method was used and both primary and secondary data are used, as well. Secondary data came from the country reports from 2011-2019 of European Commission on each country, through those data the progress or regress of each country was observed and described on each year on the freedom of expression. As the report for 2020 has yet to be published, it could not have been involved in this paper. Other secondary data

were the points that five countries received every year from Reports Without Borders, and the global ranking during those years, in order to have a view of where and how those countries perform compared with one another now and during the past decade. With regards to the primary data, there was a survey conducted online on the population of five countries. The survey got 430 responses on total from all five countries. The survey consisted of 5 questions where two of them had generic responses such as the following: yes/no/I do not know and the other three were on a ranking guide from 0 to 5, where 0 signified “no progress” and 5 signified “large progress”. These kind of surveys gave the author the commodity to reach very concrete and objective results but on the other hand, the lack of interaction and limited choices for the person who is completing the survey is a clear disadvantage.

The question of the survey were the following:

Question 1: Do you think that during the period of time 2011-2019 your freedom of expression as individual has progressed?

Question 2: Do you think that that during the period of time 2011-2019 the media is becoming freer and more independent?

Question 3: Do you think that EU integration criteria have influenced your government’s initiatives related to media in your country?

Question 4: Do you think that the media nowadays in your country is independent and not influenced by politicians?

Question 5: Do you think that freedom of expression in your country will be increased if your country will gain the EU member country status?

Sample selection

According to the samples of surveys a lot of attention was not paid because of the difficult situation presented by the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, during which this survey was carried out, so mostly the survey was shared online using a convenience sampling method and then snowballing from then on. While, about the secondary data sources, comprised of European Commission and Reports without Borders reports, the selection of them has been very careful. The

reports of European Commission were chosen to be used because EU is not only the biggest investor on the region but it is also the biggest inter-governmental institution which has been focusing so deeply on this region. Whereas, Reporters Without Borders was chosen because it is among the most reliable and well known organizations globally that gathers and presents data on the freedom of press, and as this research aimed to provide a comparison between the five countries and their positioning on global scale and this NGO was fulfilling all those criteria, it was finally selected. Another thing that was convincing is that (especially in case of Albania and Serbia) during the last years Reporters Without Borders has been present and very well updated on the reporting of the situation, which is something that other NGOs have been lacking because the focus on the region is not very huge on this particular freedom.

Research process

The period that the research was carried out has been May 2020 to August 2020, while the survey has been online for the same period of time. The survey, as it is mentioned above, has been shared online through different platforms and through emails, in the end of each survey there has been a place in order to leave some extra feedback from the person who was completing the survey. Everyone was encouraged to share the survey with one other person, employing as such the snowballing technique in the gathering of answers. Because of the difficult conditions presented by COVID-19 the research was conducted on this way so unfortunately not everything went as planned, but finally the results were gathered, after many changes. The secondary data were available online so everything was very accessible and transparent.

Data analysis

Data analysis from the European Commission reports was done personally and without the help of any program the qualitative data they provided were easily digestible by the author and were not in need of any specialized program. While the data from Reporters Without Borders were analyzed through the employment of Microsoft Office Excel and by the creation of graphs in order to have a more analytical and clear view. The difference on points between certain years was calculated using the website calculatorsoup.com. And the primary data (surveys) were analyzed through the program SPSS.

Ethical consideration

During the process for this research, it was tried to remain within ethical codes. The secondary data that are online are all being referenced, while the primary data or survey all were on voluntary basis and no respondent was forced to complete it, but it was all carried out in the participants' voluntary and individual desire.

Research limitation

This research faced way more limitations that were ever calculated when it was decided to be carried out in this topic. Some of the limitations are as it follows:

1. The survey was completed online, so the access to choose the participants was extremely limited and mostly the participants are young, as they are the most active part of society online.
2. Because of the situation presented by COVID-19, the field study was canceled so everything was forced to be adapted online in order for the research to be concluded in time for the writing of this paper.
3. The number of participants on the survey was not enough to provide representation for a population of over 50 million.
4. The research was conducted during the time when several protests were happening in the Balkan countries, such as the case of violent protests in Albania and Serbia.
5. The survey is very dependent on secondary data because of the inability to gather enough primary data as it was planned at first.

CHAPTER 1

This chapter aims to analyze the evolution of the situation from 2011 to 2019 on freedom of expression in the Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia, Serbia) based on the reports of the European Commission.

1.1 ALBANIA

The situation in 2011 in Albania is seen in positive terms overall and freedom of expression is generally respected but continuation of progress is limited. There is an advancement of investigative journalism in terms of corruption cases. Meanwhile, the reporting on elections held on May 2011 showed that media independence increased as the reporting was conducted by the media itself and it was not contained as the broadcasting of pre-prepared tapes by the respective parties. The decriminalization of defamation is, at this time and nowadays remains pending and a memorandum on the use of defamation has entered into force. Meanwhile, to add, the courts do not use the principle of proportionality, according to the severity of penalty, when it is deciding on the monetary amount of fines on those kinds of charges. A very fundamental problem is the editorial independence, which was not fully implemented because of different political or personal interests. A lot of journalists and editorials have been declare on the surveys conducted by EU, that they feel pressured and that they are not free to write or publish whatever that grabs their attention. Another major problem is the transparency regarding media ownership is lacking so there is not any information available for the owners of those media outlets. Public strongly believe that specific media support specific political party or specific politicians, any on this way they receive more subsidies or contracts on public advertising. A major challenge has been the lack of a self-regulatory body for the media. Media was not regulated through an institution that was disconnected from government, and the lack of this authority has been causing the high level of censorship or the low level of professional or ethical standards. There has been limited progress in updating media's legislation, such as on the case of not adapting a law on media ownership transparency or non-decriminalization of defamation. In general, more efforts are needed to be put in place so the media becomes truly free and independent, through addressing all the concerns which are mention above. (European Commission, 2011)

The year 2012 would bring a long-awaited progress in the field of media, which would be the changes in the Criminal and Civil law by abolishing the prison sentence for the accusation of

defamation. Despite these amendments, defamation remains a criminal charge and it is often used by the government to attack journalists. Another progress was the increase in transparency on media ownership, although all the other conditions are not noticed to have been progressing forwards, thereby leaving the actual situation almost in the same level. Government-funded advertising on private media is seen to be granted on channels that are supportive of the government. In this exact year, Albania would be recommended by the European Commission for candidate status in the European Union, but this recommendation was accompanied by 12 extra criteria that had to be met by Albania. (European Commission, 2012)

2013 would not bring any progress, and something that would be noticed was the unfair procedure of election of the members and directors of the Regulatory Body together with the fact that RTSH (Radio Televizioni Shqiptar/ Albanian Radio Television) would not be able to enjoy its independence. Political meddling would prove efficient in stopping the process of passing the laws which were focusing on these issues with regard to the media. Another worrying feature that is noticed this year is the lack of respect of the right to privacy for citizens under the age of 18 years old or groups of marginalized individuals. Overall, there is a lack of compliance with professional standards in the inner and outer mechanisms of all medias. Unfortunately, in terms of working conditions, political influence, intimidation, editorial independence and other concerning issues from the last two years, they all remained in same condition as in 2011. (European Commission, 2013)

2014 does not seem to have any progress other than unfinished attempts to implement the law on Audio-visual Media, and one of the reasons for this delay is the lack of willingness of political actors in the country and their continuous meddling with the process to protect their own personal interests. Something that is worth mentioning about the report on 2014 is the importance which is accredited to the institution that would have to deal with the investigation and consideration of comments and complaints of readers or media viewers, and this is something very progressive for the country on those years. Despite being recommended for candidate status since December 2012, Albania managed to obtain candidate status in 2014. (European Commission, 2014)

Regarding 2015, it is accompanied by progress, especially in the approval of the new law on access to information, which was voted in 2014 and meets European and international standards. Also, the transformation of the National Council on Radio and Television into AMA was an

important step. Despite that, it should also be taken into consideration that the selection of members and selection of the chairman were against certain procedures and under a government intervention. The opposition decided to address this case to the court. Public service broadcasters operated according to international standards and the form of funding was regulated and it was completely independent from the government. There is an increase in transparency in media's ownership but, on the other hand, the operation in this market by small independent media is very challenging and problematic for them. Concerning the online media, it is not regulated by law. Problems continued for journalists because of the lack of contracts provided to them, poor functioning of unions, low professional standards, influence and political interference, and low wages. And all of these would become a major reason for the creation of an unhealthy media environment and serve as key reasons directing to self-censorship of journalists in order to keep their job. Therefore, in the 2015 report, the recommendations emphasize the need to increase the transparency on government-funded advertisements in the private media outlets, to ensure equal treatment before the law regardless of professional position or social status, and to ensure the independence of RTSH and other bodies that have serve the function of media regulator. (European Commission, 2015)

Unlike 2015, 2016 does not come with progress in the field of freedom of expression, not even slightly addressing the recommendations of the European Commission. Despite the fact that the law is clearly stated, there are problems with its implementation, a very common problem for the country. Journalists who are accused of defamation, despite the fact that imprisonment is not allowed as of a few years back, still have to pay very high fines which are not at all proportionate to the severity of the crime. In 2015, two cases of intimidation were reported and the institutional responses were appropriate and these cases are severely punished by the public opinion. Media regulator, AMA, couldn't strength the footing of its own independence, as political pressure yet again, exerted its own power by interfering on the selection of members and chairman of AMA. At this point in the timeline, the center of the national register has finally gathered all the complete information on the ownership of every media in the country. The Union of Albanian Journalists has very little influence by not having the power to help the difficult situations for journalists to stop continuing (lack of contracts, low salaries, withholding payment for months) and all of this again points to self-censorship or affiliation with a particular political party, in order to keep working in this profession. (European Commission, 2016)

Now that media ownership has become transparent, there are evidences of a centralization of ownership in this industry, which were not apparent before due to the hidden nature of the information. Seeing that multiple medias being controlled by a single person, which may or may not have political or personal interests to take care of, it is recommended to draft and approve a law that would limit media ownership by a single person, an increase in the independence of the regulatory institution/RTSH and passing a law package in order to regulate transparency over state funded advertisements on the media.

The report for 2018 has shown progress, especially in the independence of the regulatory authority and public service broadcaster. The recommendations for 2018 remain the same as in 2016, but this time the implementation of the Labor Code (social and labor rights) for journalists is required. On the much darker hand, there is also an ongoing campaign which targets and attacks different media outlets or journalists which are not government supporters. As a result of this a TV program was shut down and 2 journalists were fired after they were part of an investigation case which involved a high official from local government. Every other element of the media community continued to be the same as in 2016, thus hindering further progress. (European Commission, 2018)

The last year of the provided reporting used in this paper would be 2019 and the report stated that the general situation of Albania in the field of freedom of expression is moderately prepared. While, from 2018 to 2019 there has been little and limited progress. Regarding cases of intimidation against journalists, there has been an increase in the number of attacks against them. The increase of cases on intimidation has started by an intimidated language from the chief of executive since 2017, by calling majority of journalist “kazan” or trash in English, and this trend has been followed by its ministers or Socialists Party MPs or high officials. So this approach that the new government has been impacting the general media community on the country. Another reason for the increase on intimidation cases has been the fact that more and more investigative journalists are entering on the media market and are investigating on persons who are or used to be called “the untouchable” from the journalists. At this point, it is important to single out the case of an investigative journalist whose parents' house was attacked with firearms as a warning sign. The media regulator has had improvements on qualify and added staff. Strengthening of economic stability has happened since AMA funding has been doubled, and it had decided to implement a

more specialized focus on reporting and blocking illegal broadcasting. In March 2018, the New Code of Ethics was introduced for journalists, which aimed to promote and ensure a full compliance on these standards. There is an increase in the involvement of different actors in the decision-making process. Defamation is still a criminal offense, although imprisonment is not allowed, despite that journalists risk being punished with very high and not proportionate fines. Even though, the existence of the right of access to information, it remains in need for a better implementation. There are positive developments regarding RTSH (public service broadcasting) that has adapted a new set of editorial principles in order to avoid political influence and strengthen independence. An initiative came from the private media to divide the tax collected on RTSH / TVSH between the private and the public broadcaster, but seeing as it was opposed by many elements, including the international one, the initiative got rejected by the parliament. Surviving and operating in Albanian media market, for small and independent media, is very difficult due to unfair competition. The main factor for this unfair market is the lack of funding, and mostly new medias has the tendency of criticizing the government which is followed than with an institutional or even personal attack against the media (Becchetti vs Albania) such is the example of Agon Channel. A development on the front of online media (such as portals), is the fact that the Authority for Electronic and Postal Communication (AKEP) in 2018 gave online media only 72 hours to register otherwise these particular medias would have to stop operating. (European Commission, 2019)

Albania does not have a fundamental problem in terms of legislation, but it has major ones with regard to their implementation. One of the main elements in this media environment is the non-implementation of labor rights for journalists. Based on the data collected by the EU, the main issues are the lack of job security, the lack of long-term contracts, very low salaries and often the payment is made with delays of several months, and all these together are the main reasons for self-censorship of journalists. The situation of transparency on media funding and the lack of media independence continues unequivocally.

The European Union recommendations for Albania on 2020 are: implementation and good functioning of the Labor Code for journalists, proposal and approval of a law limiting media

ownership and also for the parliament to pass the legislation that provides transparency for public advertising on private broadcasting.

Despite the current lacking of a report for 2020 (due to it still being early on the year, at the moment that this paper was written), in March 2020, it was finally decided to open negotiations with the EU for Albania, but based on a report by local NGOs and BIRN Albania, the situation has no progress, to the contrary, there are negative developments, especially on the freedom for online medias. A law has been approved for these media, which is not in compliance with international standards and endangers the survival of these media (targeting non-government online media) in the already unfair media market. The abolishment of this law has been requested by the European Commission as one of the conditions for the full opening of negotiations. The law is currently still in force but for more developments regarding the freedom of media in Albania, we will have to wait.

1.2 BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

The legal situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is at the right level and freedom of speech is protected by the constitution. But one of the most troubling elements of the media's community in BiH is the high number of reported intimidations targeting against journalists. Violence and threats are at a high and alarming level and more worrying than this situation is the insufficient response coming from B&H institutions. The media is polarized and divided into political spectrums and sometimes into ethnic ones, thus influencing an unstable media environment. The amendments made to the BHRT (public service broadcaster) status bring about more room for possible political interference and thus gain access to editorial independence. Political pressure on the Communication Regulatory Agency continues at the same levels, thus preventing the full exercise of its institutional independence. Although the Press Council of B&H operates and cooperates with the institutions of the judiciary, due to significant lack of resources, its efficiency is poor. As people become more aware of their rights, this has led to an increase in the number of individuals suing for violation of the Press Code (mainly hate speech). The Ombudsman's recommendations are not taken seriously by the institutions and their implementation is very weak. Another problem is the non-implementation of freedom of access to information by public institutions, which do not accept the dissemination of information to the public; even though, the information is in the general

interest and concern of the public. In general, political pressure remains the major cause for the instability and for the incomplete enjoyment of this freedom. (European Commission, 2011a)

The year 2012 did not bring an improvement in cases of intimidation and especially violence against journalists in B&H. Political pressure and media polarization continue to be at the same worrying levels. Some attempts to attack the CRA and the independence of it, such as the law adopted in the communication gave the CRA legal safeguards over the privacy and management of this institution. The election of CRA members is still pending, just as in 2011. Although against the law, the federal parliament attempted to appoint a temporary steering board for this institution, again exactly the same as in 2011. Press council has continued cooperation with legal institutions and journalists' associations aiming at improving professional standards, effective treatment of citizens' requests and increasing citizens' awareness of their rights, so this would bring as an outcome a more professional media. The implementation of the Ombudsman's recommendations (or to put it differently: the ignoring of the Ombudsman's recommendations) remains the same. (European Commission, 2012a)

The year 2013 would not be associated with developments, the political and financial pressure on the media is continuous and the phenomenon of intimidation against journalists continued at the same levels along with the polarization of the media. An immediate need is to ensure the CRA's independence, along with three others public service broadcasts'. Although against the law the now politically appointed provisional steering board continued its duty. A negative development comes from Republica Srpska which with the legislative amendments on the selection procedure of the RTRS board, has endangered the editorial and financial independence of the local public service broadcasting. However in the end of this year, the BHRT steering board was finally appointed. The political and financial influence is continuous even on public service broadcasting because their financing comes either from the municipalities either from cantonal. (European Commission, 2013a)

The year 2014 comes with a deterioration of the situation as there is an increase in political and financial pressure on the media. The elections held in October caused an increase in cases of intimidation against journalists and polarization of the media, thereby addressing this problem mainly to the political arena. Mostly in the part of Republica Srpsa, the institutional response against these acts remains insufficient. The Communication Regulatory Agency finally has a new

council, although the problems with political and financial independence remained the same, and in this same situation are three public service broadcasters. Initiative to appoint new members to the steering board of the Federation of BiH Radio and Television failed. RTRD's editorial independence remained at risk due to the political influence exercised over Republika Srpska, which has controlled the selection of RTRS steering board. There is an urgent need for harmonization of entity laws on public broadcasting with state level law. Media ownership is not fully transparent, and there is a severe lack of information (which is present in almost every aspect, told as follows), also online media is not regulated at all. The distribution of subsidies and public advertising in the private media by the government is also not transparent. Public institutions do not respect the Freedom of Access of Information Act. (European Commission, 2014a)

The situation in 2015 remains in the same line as in 2014, so by not progressing any further. The Federation Parliament, despite attempts, failed to select new members for the RTVF BiH steering committee. BiH Journalist Association continued its work by directing civil society efforts about freedom of expression in the country, even though a lot of journalists are part of this association, its power still remained weak. But overall it has been managed the civil society's initiatives very effectively. The only positive development for 2015 is an increase in solidarity and unity of journalists across the country. However, the EU recommendations for BiH for next year were: to ensure financial and editorial independence from politics for the three public service broadcasters, to provide appropriate institutional answers to cases of intimidation against journalists and to harmonize entity legislation with state level legislation for public service broadcasting. However of weak performance of B&H in 2015 on the field of freedom of expression, it succeeded to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union. (European Commission, 2015a)

Despite the recommendations, 2016 has no progress. Republika Srpska continues to distance itself from the state law, even after the approved amendments for public service broadcasting. The right of access to information is limited, by not passing the proportion tests. Candidates who ran in the elections were not obliged to declare their wealth, because the Central Election Commission refused to publish those statements, even though it is against the law to do so. The recommendations this time remain the same as in 2015.

The year 2018 is presented with some level of preparation in the field of freedom of speech but without progress in addressing the recommendations from last years. The Communication Regulatory Agency has seen an improvement in institutional independence but financial independence remained a challenge, due to the lack of declaring of ownership. Steering boards elected under political control in the public service broadcasting entity remained, all mention above were the main reason for self-censorship of these institutions. Republica Srbska, as an entity, finances not only local public service broadcasting but also private media which, in turn, serve in its interest. The recommendations continue in the same focus from last year. (European Commission, 2018a)

The situation in 2019 in general terms did not report progress. It is noticed that the number of media outlets had been increased, but the operation in this unfair market with a false pluralism has resulted in the fact that these media in many cases do not have life-length survival in this industry. BiH society continues to be divided, sometimes in ethnicities and sometimes in political camps. The intimidation of journalists continues in very high numbers, and public organizations are not committed on collecting data about these cases. Also, the institutional response remains very unprofessional and inefficient, even though a solution to this situation is desperately required. Defamation has been decriminalized since 2002 but it needs improvements in hate speech laws and better implementation of the law on access to information. The CRA still has challenges to its financial independence and needs to improve the procedure for selecting its board of directors. Although the recommendations of The Press Council are aimed at improving the quality of the media, they are not implemented because they are not binding for the institutions. Allocation of a RTV collective subscription fee would be a great solution for gaining financial independence of public service broadcast, seeing as it is lacking. Transparency in the media remains the same and it needed to be improved. Another very worrying problem is lack of job security for journalists, the lack of contracts, low salaries and the fear of being attacked, these are issues that require immediate action. Non-transparency in the distribution of subsidies and public advertising should also be addressed, along with the harmonization of laws between entities and the state level. Associations are not absent and those have an important role in the safety of journalists but their influence is limited. Bosnia and Herzegovina together with Kosovo are the only countries in the Western Balkans that have not been opened negotiations and retains at the status of potential candidate. (European Commission, 2019a)

1.3 MONTENEGRO

The situation in Montenegro in 2011 is generally respected in the field of freedom of expression. Defamation and insult has been decriminalized and fines are regulated according to law and those have limits by being in line with international standards. Defamation allegations have declined in number after decriminalization of it and ECtHR decisions are an important source of law for final decision of national courts. In 2011 there were not reporting on cases of violence against journalists but the building of a newspaper was set on fire and the suspects are over a high official, but the investigation is still ongoing. Cases of intimidation in the past have been left without perpetrators and without an effective institutional response. Respect for professional standards should be improved, financial independence and monitoring activities of media self-regulatory body should make progress as well. In the same boat, is public service broadcaster which is having issues with independence, lack of professionalism, inadequate/unstable funding, nepotism during hiring process, and weak representation of civil society on its management body. (European Commission, 2011b)

Progress is reported for 2012, and the decriminalization of defamation has had a very positive effect on Montenegro's media environment. An amnesty was passed for cases of defamation and insults for 2012. Political control over the media and public service broadcaster continues to be a concern, and the response of institutions in cases of intimidation against journalists needs to be improved. Electronic Media Agency has increased its staff numbers after it has expanded its media monitoring activity. New changes in the law are limiting the ability to ensure the full independence of the media body regulator. Also, the reform of improving the professional standards and ensuring sufficient funding for public broadcasting should continue. This year which has been reported with progress, was very important for Montenegro's integration in European Union, as the decision to open negotiations would be the outcome of all the aforementioned positive developments. (European Commission, 2012b)

The year 2013 comes with progress especially in the institutional response in cases of intimidations against journalists, by seeing a serious follow up about these cases. The training of judges has given the required effect, because many decisions taken by national judges are being inspired and following the same line as the decisions of the ECtHR. State Privatization of the

national newspaper was not realized. Concerns about the lack of a legislative framework for public advertising and for non-existence of media self-regulatory body, are continuing. Concerns about non-compliance with professional standards, are continuing as well. The issue of non-respecting ethical code and professional standards are one of the main reason for fake new, not true reporting and poor level of professional reporting and in a lot of cases working pro-specific interest of certain persons on the country. In 2013 it was decided to open the chapters 23 and 24 of the European Union Integration, by advancing further on the European Integration journey. (European Commission, 2013b)

The year 2014 does not come with progress as there are an increased number of cases of intimidation and attacks on media's property. A commission was created to monitor the responses of responsible institutions in cases of intimidation against journalists, and its opinions are binding. This is a breath of fresh air when it comes to journalists being threatened due to their professions, especially when you take into consideration the situation of the other aforementioned countries. Some cases of intimidation have completed the investigation but some others are still in the corner. Concerns about professional standards, were continuing, there is a public discourse on the possibility of creating a body to have as a function the ensuring of compliance with professional standards by journalists, but some major media have created their own media ombudsman body. (European Commission, 2014b)

Although the situation in 2015 is reported with some level of preparation, there has been no progress. Despite the fact that the number of intimidation cases remains the same, the established commission should be more effective and its mandate was extended until 2015. Although the guides for the court are not missing in order for it to follow the ECtHR line in its decision-making, the implementation of these directives is very problematic. The financial independence of the public service broadcaster (RTCG) is guaranteed, because 0.3% of Montenegro's GDP goes to finance this institution, but, due to this circumstance, the same thing cannot be said for its editorial independence. Although media ownership is limited, the lack of transparency in public advertising is still a concern. Many media outlets are on the verge of bankruptcy as they have very high taxes to pay, and normally many journalists were facing very poor working conditions (no contract, low and late wages, no job security) so consequently this brings self –censorship as a consequence. Journalists are not very close to each other but they are still part of different unions. Media Self-

Regulatory Council does not represent the entire media community. Around 500 journalists lost their jobs, 3 televisions were shut down and 1 newspaper was shut down as well, due to bankruptcy. Recommendations for 2016 are: a better investigation of the current and past cases of intimidation against journalists, ensuring fully independence of the RTCG, and delivering assistance for the implementation of court directives so the issuing decisions would be in line with ECHR standards. (European Commission, 2015b)

The situation in 2016 is presented in general terms the same as the situation in 2015, not marking progress. The large number of defamation accusation continues and the institution of media self-regulation is still weak. Progress is seen in the investigations of cases of intimidation from the past. The parliament also created a special commission to ensure the implementation of court directives, in order to follow the lines of ECHR. The media attack against the opposition and civil society has continued, and the disunity between the media continues as well. The consequences of taxes and financial problems of private media are directly affecting journalists and their working conditions. Public service broadcaster has gained financial independence but it must strengthen its editorial independence. Overall the situation of freedom of expression for 2016 in Montenegro remains the same and the recommendations are the same as in 2015. (European Commission, 2016b)

Even the situation in 2018 does not report progress, by remaining at the same level since 2016. Even this year, the reports show a growth on the number of allegations for defamation and no development of investigations of intimidation cases. The ad hoc committee which was created by parliament has progressed in reporting but not in the full implementation of directives about the court. There are still existing problems with the lack of transparency in public advertising and political control over the media continues. However, the law on abolishment of public advertisements on private media has been respected. The situation of journalists including their working conditions has not been changed at all. Trade unions remains very weak but they still continue to play a very small role in the Montenegrin media's environment. (European Commission, 2018b)

2019 appears in the same situation, so in general terms Montenegro has some level of preparation, however no progress is noticed during the reporting period starting from when the last one left off. Little progress is reported in the investigation of intimidation cases, but again the

institutional response in these cases should be more serious. The ad hoc commission set up by the parliament has continued to report cases of violence, provided access to information for the public and journalists, reported on the progress of investigations, but its recommendations have not yet been fully implemented. For 2019, it is expected to pass a package of three laws, specifically the law on media, the law on public service broadcaster and the law on electronic media, this package must meet all European standards. The phenomenon of media polarization continues by directly influencing self-regulatory bodies, which needs to improve its mechanisms in order to achieve full compliance with professional standards. The replacement of RTCG board members raised concerns about a weakening of institutional independence and an increase in political control over the institution. Concerns about the lack of transparency in public advertising continue, as it influences the professional level of reporting. Journalists continue to be part of the media trade union but these unions must strengthen their role. Regarding the working condition of journalists, the situation has not changed. Recommendations from the European Commission for 2020 for Montenegro include progress in investigating cases of intimidation in the past and present, an immediate increase in financial and editorial independence of RTCG and AEM, and the last one establishment of a self-regulatory body to work effectively. (European Commission, 2019b)

1.4 NORTH MACEDONIA

The situation in North Macedonia in 2011 appears positive in terms of legislative framework and constitutional protection, but the problems are on the implementation of those freedoms and rights. Progress is noted on the establishment of the first union for journalists and media workers, in order to improve their working conditions. Implementation of the collective subscription fee, brought the improvement of financial independence for public service broadcaster but it is still not enough. Transparency on media's ownership is lacking and politics are very influential on them. The government is the biggest advertiser in the country and on this way, it can have a bigger influence over media. There are cases where specific media are donors or funders on political parties (on the main ones). North Macedonia has opened an investigation on AITV and some newspapers which have been criticizing the government, so total independence from politics does not seem that feasible. On 2011, there has been an increase on cases of intimidation against journalists and an increase of political influence over media. The press council did not exist in North Macedonia at the time. Amendments to the Law on the Broadcasting Council are approved

without a public discourse and by not including all the stakeholders, those amendments increased the number of members appointed by government on this council, thereby worsening the situation. Later on, the government implemented a round table in order to increase cooperation with the media on its decision-making process. (European Commission, 2011c)

2012 comes with progress, the implementation of the aforementioned round table has been very beneficial because it has been emphasizing several of the most important issues. They signed a memorandum in order to address 5 concerns which were: decriminalization of defamation, strengthening the independence of public service broadcaster, ensuring respect for professional standards and increasing transparency on public advertising and inclusion of different stakeholders on decision making process in the field of freedom of expression. A new law on Civil Liabilities and defamation was adopted and it met European standards. During 2012, training on Article 10 of the ECHR and translations of European Court of Human Rights decisions were provided for national judges. The Broadcasting Council has expanded its activities by monitoring illegal ownership. Television A2TV I's license was removed because it was not in the same line with the broadcasting program. More importance seems to be given on improvement on non-discrimination by the Broadcasting Council to various media and advancement of the conditions in which journalists work. (European Commission, 2012c)

2013 also brings progress by decriminalizing defamation, and setting a maximum for fines that can be charged on cases of defamation, insult or civil liability. Trainings on Article 10 of the ECHR with judges have continued. The incidents that took place on December 24 would ruin the balance of relations between the government and the Association of Journalists, which were created through a round table session. The Broadcasting Council is continuing its work, by assisting new media outlets on getting adapted to the media industry and by developing a new media strategy as well. There are some steps to be done in order to advance which include: ensuring participation of different actors in the process of decision-making on the field of freedom of expression, increase of transparency on public advertising, ensuring balanced coverage on elections by different outlets and improvement of working conditions for journalists in order to prevent self-censorship. (European Commission, 2013c)

The situation is continuing to be problematic, and the state continues to control the media through subsidies or public advertising during 2014. Broadcasting program of public service

broadcaster is not balanced between the government and the opposition (especially during elections). In a lot of cases information reported is even false or fake by violating in this way the professional standards. Media Ethics Council was created as a self-regulatory body, in order to get more focus on improvement of professional standards. Defamation lawsuits are used as a tool for pressure on journalists by politicians. Problems with the working conditions of journalists continue to rise along with the level of self-censorship. The implementation of the law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Service needs to be improved, and public advertising should have as the main aim the informing of the public and not the promotion of the government. A positive development is the lack of cases of intimidation of journalists for this year during the duration of the report. (European Commission, 2014c)

The situation in 2015 is not very positive and it is without progress. Cases of intimidation have been increased if they are compared to the previous report. Legislation for hate speech is on line with European standards but investigations carried out about it are in very limited numbers. The reform in order to ensure public access to information should be implemented. In terms of regulatory body, the Broadcasting Council has been replaced with Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, but it is still lacking fully independence (it enjoys only the financial one). Still online media has no self-regulatory body. Because of existence of a not very friendly media environment, media are repeatedly suing each other on the Media Ethics Council. MRT does not enjoy financial independence, the collective subscription fee is not enough to fulfill all expenditures and the professional level of reporting remains very poor by failing to cover the issues of most interest to the public. In order to ensure media independence, a legislation about media ownership limitation should be adopted. The transparency on public advertising should be regulated through adopting a new legislative framework because public advertising are accredited to the media which are supportive of governments. In Macedonia there are two associations for journalists: MAN(Association of Journalists of Macedonia and Macedonian Association of Journalists) is a supporter of the government while JAM emphasizes the need for transparency in government advertising on private media outlets. The situation of working conditions of journalists remains the same. The European Union recommends for Macedonia in the next year to take action in order to ensure the transparency of government advertising on private media outlets, reforming and ensuring that defamation accusations are not a means of putting political pressure against

journalists and increasing the quality of reporting by respecting professional standards. (European Commission, 2015c)

2016 does not report progress and most of the issues and problems from the last year remain the same. However, there is a small improvement in equality in space withheld in the news between the opposition and the government, but on the other hand on the private media the opposition is reported negatively. Working conditions have become even more difficult, and there has also been an increase in self-censorship. The Agency for Audio-visual Services has taken several actions in order to achieve a wider respect for professional standards. Although the new law set limits on the ownership of audiovisual and print media, it remains very clear that certain media belong to certain persons who have close affiliation with the party on power. Although the government has banned advertising in the private media, there is still a lack of transparency in how these contracts used to work. A new association named, Independent Syndicate of Journalists in Macedonia has been created. The recommendations remain the same as the last year. (European Commission, 2016c)

The year 2018 is accompanied by positive progress in the media environment of North Macedonia. The right of access to information has increased for journalists and citizens. Political pressure on journalists has decreased, and the government has signed a contract which is aiming a more effective institutional response to cases of journalist's intimidation. In general, reporting of cases of intimidation remains very unprofessionally addressed in public broadcasting. Amendments to the Law on Audio and Audio-Visual Services have been approved by the new government, which aims to involve all actors in the decision-making process (in the field of freedom of speech). It also aims to reduce fines in cases of defamation. While the Agency for Audio and Audio-visual Services has had improvements in its role, mainly in monitoring unequal reporting and ensuring that prohibition advertising for political promotion is respected. Despite these positive developments, compliance with professional standards remains very low. MRT, too, had a more balanced reporting during the elections but it has still a lot to do. For the financing of MRT, 0.5% of the budget of North Macedonia will be allocated per year. The new government stops the government advertisements in the private media, thus achieving one of the priorities of the urgent reform. Situation on online media is represented as very unorganized and it seems that politics has started to control online media as well so the non-compliance with professional standards and excessive use of hate speech are a common thing on those online news websites.

The recommendations for 2018 remain the same. This year, the European Council recommended opening of negotiations for North Macedonia. (European Commission, 2018c)

Even 2019 would be accompanied by progress and by appearing moderately prepared for the freedom of expression. The ban on public advertising is respected, whereas the independence of public broadcasting needs to be improved. Amendments to the media law required the immediate establishment of associated/independent institutions. Private media funding and working conditions for journalists continued to be problematic. The media environment has been improved because some of the recommendations of previous years have been addressed. Funding for public service broadcasting was getting increased from 0.5% to 0.8% of North Macedonia's total GDP, but full editorial independence is still lacking. Cases of intimidation have decreased but they are still happening, so a more serious and institutional follow-up to these cases is needed. Online media is still unregulated and is a platform used for defamation, fake news, hate speech and inaccurate reporting thus violating every journalistic principle. False reporting continues as a phenomenon in offline (printed or TV) media well, so it needs to be a target as well. Therefore, in general, compliance with professional standards remains a very important challenge for North Macedonia. No improvements have been made in terms of working conditions of journalists and the phenomenon of self-censorship is continuing on the same levels. The European Commission's Recommendations for Northern Macedonia in 2020 are: taking action to support media's pluralism, ensured compliance with professional standards by reporting real information, reformation of public broadcaster in order to achieve full independence and a professional, serious and institutional response to cases of intimidation of journalists. (European Commission, 2018c)

Despite the lack of a report for 2020 in order to be represented on this paper due to the timing it was written, the European Commission has decided to open negotiations for Northern Macedonia.

1.5 SERBIA

Serbia is the country that has made the most progress on the road to European Union, by being the first to open negotiations and then the chapters after that. As a result, the situation in 2010 is generally respected and the legal framework is up to standard. The intimidation of journalists is still in very high numbers and the institutional response has more room to be more effective.

Progress on investigating previous killings of journalists is lacking, making the situation very serious. (European Commission, 2011e)

The year 2012 is presented with some slight progress, the legal framework continues to not have been changed. Institutions are working on a new media strategy. The Republican Broadcasting Agency has marked improvements in the quality of its work. Number of intimidations continues at the same levels, and without an effective institutional response. Monitoring of discrimination and hate speech needs to be improved. The RBA (Republican Broadcasting Agency) selection procedure is very problematic by not ensuring its independence. Continuous controlling of the politics over media is the main reason for self-censorship from the journalists' part. Transparency on media ownership needs to be improved. (European Commission, 2012e)

And the year 2013 comes with progress, by decriminalizing defamation and the creation of a commission to investigate cases of intimidation of journalists, although, the number of reported cases of intimidation has not been decreased even for 2013. It is necessary to continue reforming media strategy in order to stop control over media and to ensure transparency on state subsidies for private media. Public private partnership on media sector is prohibited. Financial independence for both RTS (Radio Television of Serbia) and RTV (Radio-televizija Srbije) is lacking. The selection procedure for RTV continues to be problematic. The implementation of legal instruments on access to public information, media, public service broadcasters and electronic communication need to be adopted. It often happens that various media campaigns are funded by anonymous sources. Exactly this year, Serbia had signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement and it has been accredited opening of negotiations. (European Commission, 2013e)

The year 2014 brought progress with the adoption of three laws on electronic media, public service broadcasting and public information. But self-censorship remains a problem together with financial independence and lack of transparency. The Commission which was set up to investigate cases of intimidation has progressed with its work. The intimidation of journalists continues at the same levels. Regulatory Body for Electronic media has been progressing on its monitoring role but much more is needed to be done on strengthening its independence. The very slow implementation of media strategy continues. Strengthening of journalists' associations would bring greater respect for journalists' labor rights. Minority language broadcasting from public

broadcaster and a stable funding for public service broadcaster is recommended. Lack of ethical and professional code from media staff is reported even this year. (European Commission, 2014e)

The year 2015 would not bring progress, and the created media environment would not give the opportunity for the full enjoyment of freedom of expression. The intimidation continues at the same levels but the Commission has progressed in targeting it. Great challenges also arise for the right of access to information at public institutions, which agree to pay large financial fines by refusing to not serve information to the public. Although the package of three laws was approved, its implementation is facing obstacles. Regulatory Body for Electronic Media, despite not being able to improve its institutional independence, has had an improvement in its monitoring role. The Press Council has continued its role, by emphasizing even more the needed respect for professional standards. Problems continue in the financing of public service broadcaster and the lack of broadcasting in the minority language. Politics control over media is still on the same level, and Medias which are supporting the government are receiving benefits such as subsidies or public advertising on return. Working conditions of journalists continue in the same situation with low pay, an unsafe environment and without contracts thus being a cause for self-censorship. The European Union recommends for Serbia in 2016 the creation of a secure media environment for journalists, the start of the media privatization process and ensuring the independence of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media, together with the provision of sufficient funding for public service broadcasting. (European Commission, 2015e)

The year 2016 would not bring progress in the field of freedom of expression in Serbia. The package of three media laws remains unfulfilled, although passed. The recommendation of media privatization was addressed but this development did not have an impact on increasing the media's transparency. Intimidation continues at the same levels and progress in the cases of murders committed in 1999 and 2001 is still lacking. Public institutions continue to disrespect the right of access to information. Regulatory Body for Electronics Media has been operated with difficulty because not all its members are selected. The press council continues to function, and it has recorded an increase in the number of non-compliance with the journalists' code. Although funding was implemented through the allocation of a subscription fee for public service broadcasting, it is still insufficient. The situation of political control in the media and working conditions for journalists are at the same level as they were shown in the previous report. Recommendations

remain the same as in previous years, as well. Although there has been no progress this year in the area of media freedom, this has not been an obstacle for the European Union to open Chapter 23 on “Justice and fundamental rights” and Chapter 24 on “Justice, Freedom and Security”. (European Commission, 2016e)

The situation for 2018 is reported with some level of preparation but without progress. Because intimidation cases are not declining, it has been proposed that journalists' intimidation would be classified as a criminal offense. Finally, the commission which was set up to investigate cases of intimidation has uncovered the killings that took place from 1999 to 2001. The implementation of the package of laws continues to remain suspended. The press council reported that non-compliance with the journalism code has been increased by 7% in 2018. The environment created is not very safe and favorable for journalists, activists and human rights advocates, so they should be supported in their jobs. REM did not address the fact of media is not reporting a balanced coverage during the presidential elections of 2016. And the situation of labor rights for journalists remains at the same level. (European Commission, 2018e)

The year 2019 comes with an increasing level of preparation but no progress from 2018. Finally, they submitted a draft on a new system about public right to information. The intimidation of journalists is still at alarming levels but progress is seen in the institutional responses in these cases, however more action needs to be taken to combat this phenomenon. There should be an awareness campaign for Hate Speech, so this phenomenon can be stopped by the public and the institutions. The new media strategy must be implemented and through this it will be possible to ensure transparency in media ownership and financing, which continue to be great concerns. The Commission for Investigation of intimidation cases continues to work with positive developments, but more can be done by the Attorney General and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Both of institutions are help responsible for institutional response in cases of intimidation, in the case of Attorney General who is responsible in committing faster investigation(giving priority on investigation of intimidation cases) and Ministry of Internal Affairs should take an action plan in order to fight against the phenomena that journalist are often attacked by police officers. The full independence of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media must be achieved. The situation is problematic in terms of online Hate Speech. The press council continues to report violations of professional standards. Journalists do not enjoy their labor right by lacking job security, having

low wages, a lack of contracts and working in an unsafe environment where journalist association are, to add, very weak. Recommendations for the next year from the European Commission for Serbia are the immediate improvement of the media environment (making it safer for journalists), ensuring sufficient funding for public service broadcasting and the full and without delay implementation of the package of three laws in order to strengthen the independence of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media. (European Commission, 2019e)

1.6 Conclusions of the Chapter 1

In conclusion, what was observed throughout the individual analysis of each state is the fact that in many areas there had been a significant progress and in some others you can observe a deterioration of the situation or lack of progress, thus turning those into the biggest problem in the field of freedom of expression within each state.

In Albania, there has been the greatest progress in transparency on media ownership where in 2016, all the information on shareholders of Audio and Audio-visual media is accessible to the public through the National Assets Register. While the element which has lacked progress in Albania has been lack of independence of AMA, and the recently added phenomena of attacking online media and intimidating language against journalists.

Concerning Bosnia and Herzegovina, I would single out the establishment of the Press Council as the greatest progress, as this council has done a very serious job, by fulfilling the neglecting tasks of other institutions in the country. This council has played a very effective role, especially in expanding its tasks in 2012, where it undertook duties such as: to improve professional standards in order to improve the quality of reporting, to enable a better interaction between trade unions and the courts, and most recently one to raise public awareness over their rights and analyzing citizen feedback. While, according to the areas in which Bosnia has not progressed are the division and polarization of every sphere of life in Bosnian society and beyond, this polarization has offered to entities the opportunities to benefit by centralizing their power and not allowing the necessary progress for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In general, the countries of the region suffer from high levels of intimidation against journalists, and combating this phenomenon has been the greatest progress for Montenegro in this decade. The establishment of the Commission for monitoring institutional responses in cases of intimidation has been a very remarkable progress, as the responsible institutional response in

these cases is the only way to combat this phenomenon and also the opinions of this commission were binding for the institutions of Montenegro. Although as the most problematic element in the region I would single out the establishment of a self-regulatory body for the media, as the one that exists is extremely weak and inefficient.

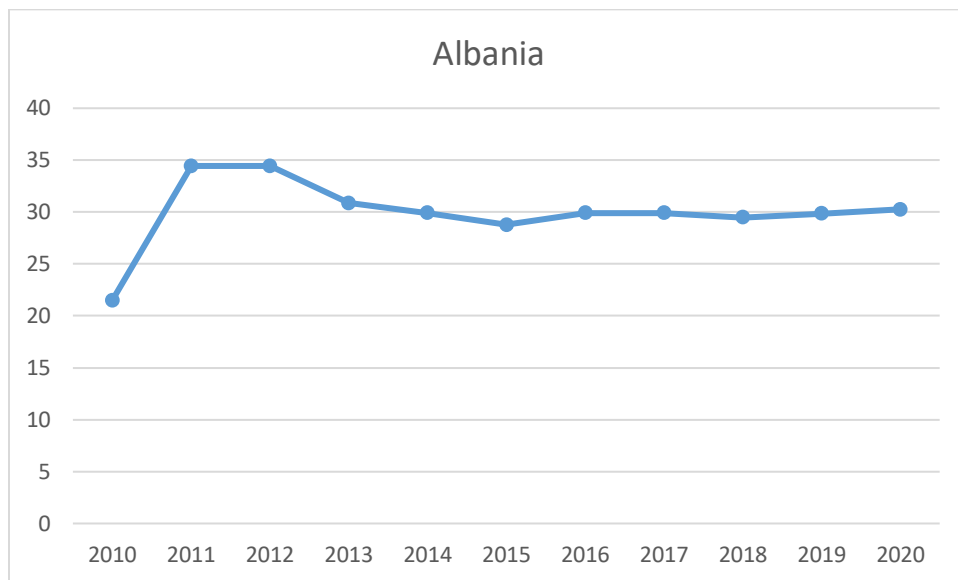
In the case of Macedonia, we cannot emphasize the banding and public advertising in private media as the greatest progress when we also know that the government is the largest client in the country, especially in the field of publicity. Overall Macedonia has seen significant progress in recent years since the new government came to power, by increasing to 0.8% of Macedonia's GDP funding for public service broadcaster has been another progress. Remains as a very problematic area and without progress is the fact of non-compliance with professional standards by journalist, and this has had impacted directly the quality of reporting.

According to the biggest success of Serbia is on the same element as in Montenegro, that means the creation of the commission about the investigation of intimidation cases against journalists especially from the past. Serbia used to have very serious issue with life security of journalists and during 1999 and 2001 a several journalists were murdered but it took a long time and the created commission in order to find responsible persons for those horrible acts and to put them before the law (some investigation are still ongoing). While the issues where there is no progress if we compare with the region I would emphasized the adequate funding for public service broadcaster, and non-expectation of the right for access to information. Both of those issues are extremely crucial to build a healthy democratic society and to ensure a safe media environment.

Overall, all the countries are having serious issues with adaptation of contradictory laws(Albania law for online media, Republica Srbska law etc), lack of full implementation, strengthening of media's transparency, political interference and non-respect of Labor rights for journalists and a lot of other issues.

CHAPTER 2: OVERVIEW OF PERFORMANCE OF FREEDOM OF PRESS IN WESTERN BALKANS

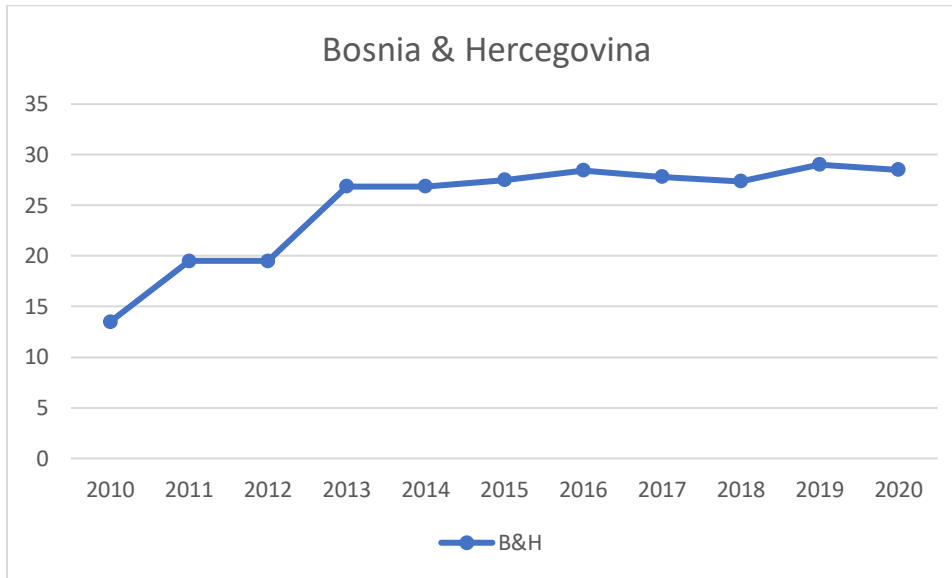
2.1. ALBANIA



As it can be seen very easily, in the chart shown above, Albania has had a sharp decline in its performance during the period 2010-2011, moving from 21.5 points to 34.44 points, it means that it scored an astounding difference measured at 46.2%. The years 2011 and half of 2012 would be the years that constituted the end of the second term for the right-wing government in Albania. In 2013, the situation is improving, by marking 30.88 points or a difference of 10.9% from 2011. The progress in this situation would continue for two years in a row, in 2014 with a decrease of 3.1% in points and in 2015 with a decrease of 3.9% or by scoring 28.77 points (the lowest one recorded since 2010). 2016 reported an increase of points, by scoring 29.92, and it remained at the same level for 2017. An improvement of a difference of 1.44% in points would be reported in 2018, and on the same year Albania would receive the recommendation from the European Council to open negotiations. Nevertheless, the European Commission would decide to open negotiations in 2020, which compared to 2018 in the field of press freedom had a slightly deterioration of 2.5% or an increase of 0.76 points, following the same pattern as around the region.

The thing that is easily noticed in this curve is that after the deterioration 2011/2012, an improvement is seen until 2015, and after 2015 it is noticed that the curb moved with very small percentages keeping more or less the balance around the mean value of 30 points.

2.2. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

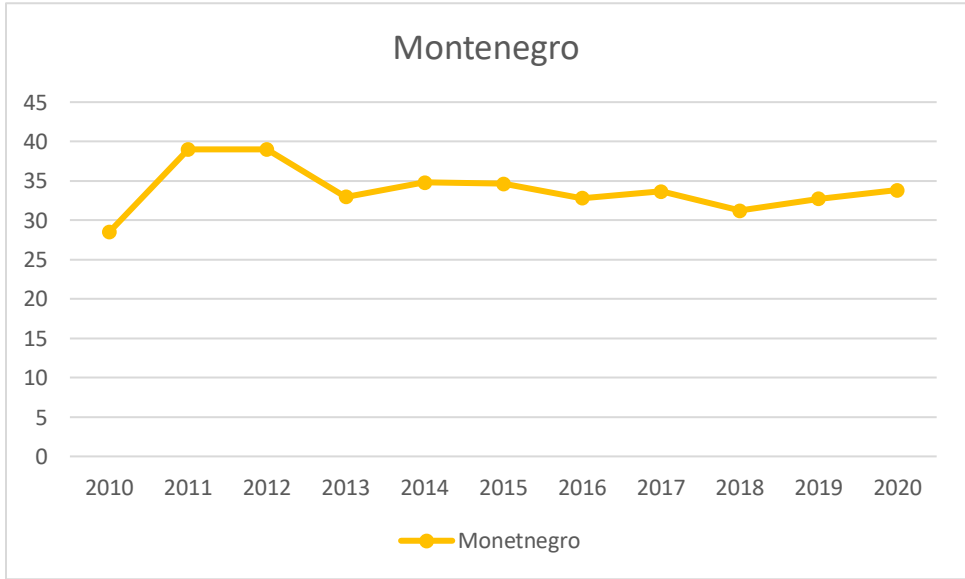


Bosnia and Herzegovina is the country that is scoring better on the region but at the same time Bosnia is still a potential candidate and not a candidate country like Serbia, Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia. Bosnia has its best scoring on 2010 by scoring 13.5 points and since then the curve (as shown above) is going up by showing a worse performance of press freedom in this country which is fighting for candidate country status. However, unfortunately, its worst performance is on 2020 where it is scoring 28.51 points, the difference on percentage between those performances is 71%, that means that the gap of points between 2010 and 2020 is tremendous. From 2010 to 2011, is the period where the gap has been deepened further with an increase of points by 36.3% within two years, which is translated into a very significant deterioration of the situation. The second period in the deepening of this gap is from 2012 to 2013, when the gap is getting even wider because of 31.7% increase in the provided statistics and through the marking of 26.86 points, so in total within three years Bosnia and Herzegovina has had a deterioration of the situation by 66%. After such a major deterioration, it seems that the situation got slightly stabilized somewhere between the years 2013 and 2014, by remaining at the same level of points, and in the same year the Stabilization and Association Agreement between the European Union and Bosnia and Herzegovina would enter into force. Despite such an important step for EU integration, a very small deterioration with a point increase of 2.3% would be marked in 2015 yet again, and another one with 3.35% would be marked in 2016. After two years in a row

there would be an improvement of the situation, after a decrease of points by 2.2% in 2017 and 1.6% in 2018. 2019 would mark a deterioration of the situation with an increase of 5.8% of the points, while the situation would have a slight improvement in 2020 marking 28.51 points (1.7% decrease in points).

Based on the curve, it is noticed that the situation is somewhat balanced with no major changes after 2013, moving within the figures 29.02 and 26.86. But what is seen as more worrying is the fact that even after the signing of the agreement with the EU, there is no initiative from Bosnia to significantly improve the situation in the field of right of speech on the country or to get committed in order to go back at the same figures as before 2011. Unfortunately in percentage Bosnia is the country which has had the highest percentage of deterioration between the values recorded in the 2010 -2020 period, which expressed in percentages marks an increase of 71%, translated into a huge deterioration of the situation.

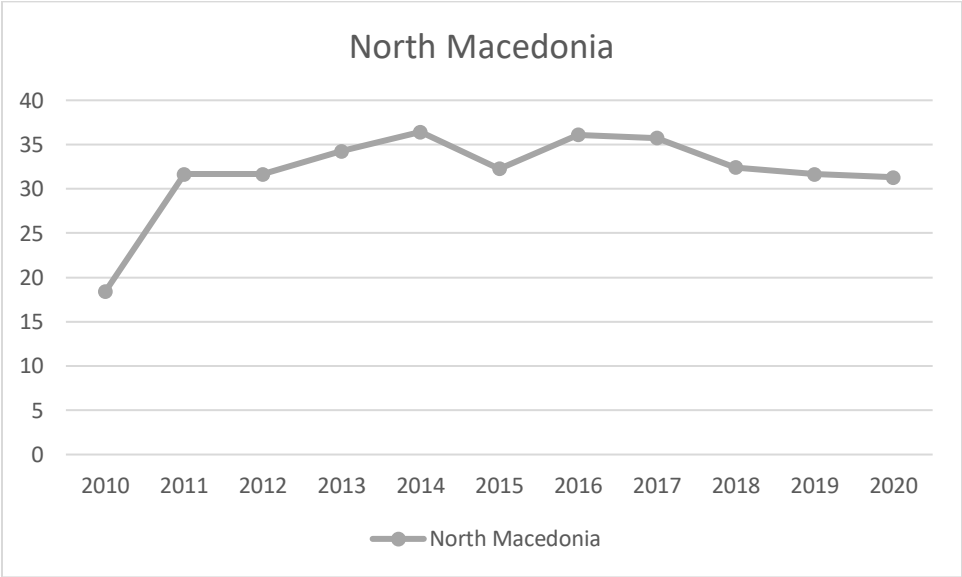
2.3. MONTENEGRO



Although Montenegro is the country that had scored the worst performance in the region for 2010, by scoring 28.5 points, it is the country with the smallest difference of the points scored from 2010 to 2020. Like every other country in the region, that was studied in this paper, the period from 2010 in 2011 would be accompanied by a very significant deterioration of the situation and

a difference of 31% in this case. But, this deterioration in the freedom of the press would not prove to be an obstacle at all for Montenegro as the European Council would recommend the opening of negotiations. But only two years later when the performance of press freedom would get improved by 32.97 points or -16.7% the opening of negotiations would take place. The year 2014 would be followed by a deterioration of performance, translated into an increase of 5.3% (or scoring 34.78), despite that the opening of chapters 23 and 24 would not be hindered by this fact. The situation until 2017 would move with very small percentages and points by not marking any significant improvement and it reported 33.65 points for 2017. But 2018 would report progress, by marking a difference of 10.4% from 2017, and this progress would soon be followed by a very slight deterioration of the situation in 2019 (+ 4.7% /32.74 points) and 2020 (+ 3.2% / 33.83 points). Due to these statistics, it seems that Montenegro is rightfully very focused in its quest to provide a better environment in access to the freedom of speech.

2.4. NORTH MACEDONIA

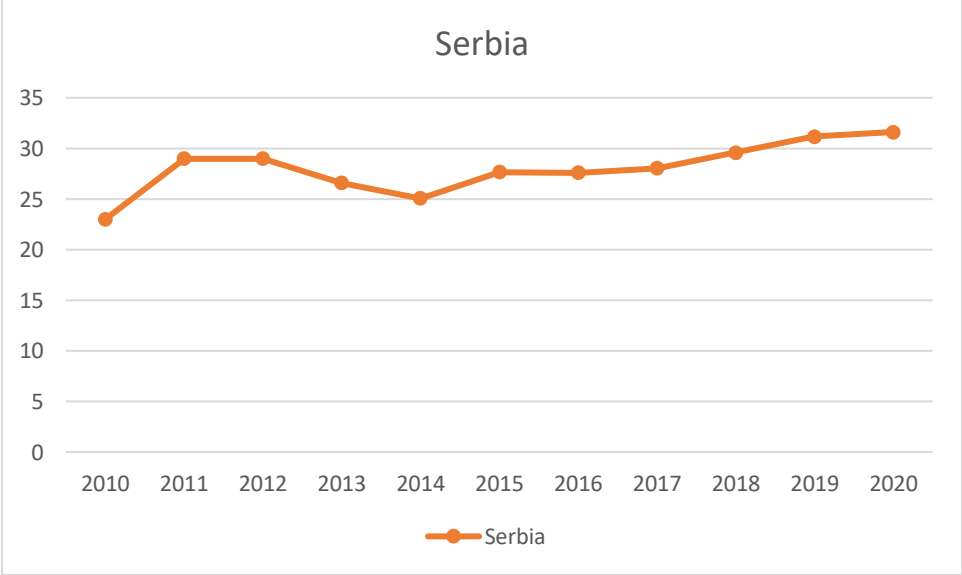


North Macedonia is the country that has marked the highest difference on points between 2010 and 2020, with a rate of 53%, which can be translated into deterioration of situation because it is reported that in 2010, it had scored 18.4 points while in 2011 , it scored 31.67 points. This deterioration of the situation would continue even during 2013 (with an increase of 7.8% or 34.27 points) and 2014 (with an increase of 6.1% or 36.43 points). 2014 is the year which holds the record as the year with the worst annual performance in the decade from 2010 and until 2020 for North Macedonia. But in percentages, from 2010 to 2014, the points has been increasing with a

stratospheric percentage estimated at 65.7% which is the highest one on the region for the short period of time made out of 4 years. However, the year 2015 would report an immediate improvement of the present conditions with a significant decrease of 12.1% or 32.26 points, but it is followed by 2016, which reported a deterioration again, by marking 36.09 points (+ 11.2%). A very small improvement came in 2017, with a decrease of 0.9% in the points of 2017, and it would be followed by another improvement which was more emphatic with a decrease of 9.7% in 2018, and this progress will be followed with the positive recommendation of European Council on opening of negotiations with North Macedonia. In this line, the conditions of freedom of speech in North Macedonia have been pretty fluctuant at best. Negotiations would be opened two years later in 2020, and both of the years of the intermediate period were reporting improvements with a respective 2.4% in 2019 and 1.2% in 2020, thus so scoring the lowest points since 2012.

North Macedonia, unlike Serbia, understood that it has to take urgent actions in order to improve the situation after the unexceptional increase from 2010 to 2016 (by 65.7%). Using the above graph, North Macedonia has being systematically and seriously trying to improve its situation, seeing as since 2017 to 2020, there were only improvements with a difference in percentage of 13.3%. In total, North Macedonia is scoring a difference in points of over 51.8% for a period from 2010 to 2020, which may not be the highest one on the region but it is a very positive sign to continue and progress more.

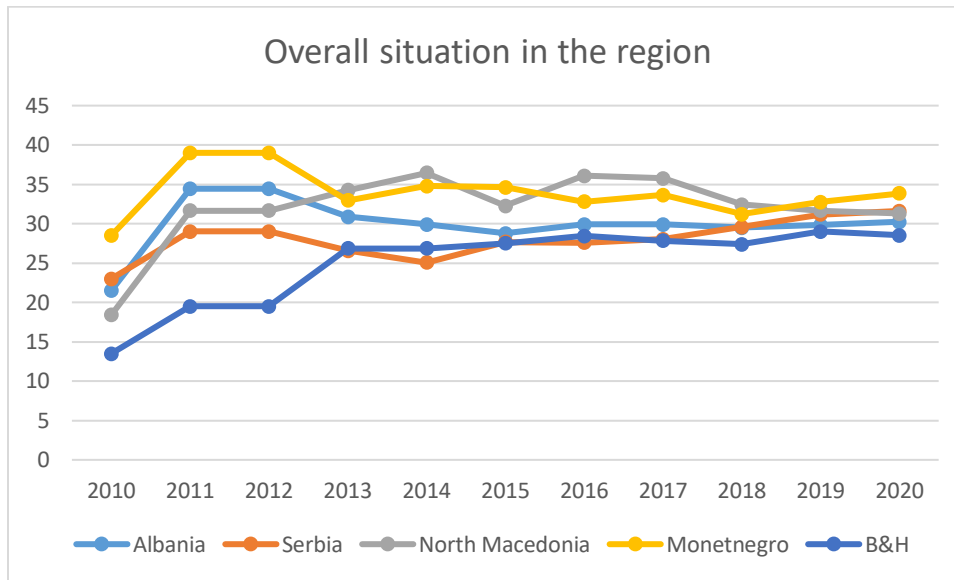
2.5. SERBIA



The graph above shows the performance of Serbia from 2010 to 2020 on press freedom according to the data of Reports without Borders. What we can see from the graph is that on 2010 (ten years ago) Serbia was performing much better than now or during all this decade. Compared to other countries, Serbia marks the smallest difference (in calculated percentages) in points from 2010 to 2011 but it still remains a fairly significant difference of 23%. What is worrying for Serbia is the fact that the difference in percentages between the points marked in 2010 and those marked in 2020 is 71.04%, thus being the country with the highest percentage difference showing deterioration of the situation in the region. Although the freedom of press deteriorated by 23% in 2011 this did not stop the European Commission from awarding Serbia the title of candidate country in 2013. But it is worth mentioning that in 2013 Serbia scored 26.59 points, a decrease of 8.6% of the points compared with 2011. An improvement of the same performance would happen in 2014 (a decrease of 5.9%) due, in part, to which the green light for the opening of negotiations between the EU and Serbia would be attributed. But the opening of negotiations apparently was not enough of an important reason for Serbia to take incentives in order to continue its furthering of progress with regard to the improvement of press freedom, as in 2015 Serbia had a 9.9% increase, translated into 27.66 points, the deterioration was significant and it would remain on the same levels even during 2016. The year 2017 marked small deteriorations with a difference of 1.6% in points but again the decision of EU to open the Chapter 23 "Judiciary and fundamental rights" and Chapter 24 "Justice, freedom and security", would not see this situation as an obstacle. The deterioration would continue in 2018 (with a difference of 5.3%) and in 2019 (with a difference of 5.2%). Unfortunately, the situation got worse (and could possibly get even worse, before it gets any better) because of a decrease in percentage in 2020, specifically by marking 31.62 points, which is the highest value recorded in the timeline from 2010 to 2020 for Serbia.

In percentages, the difference of points from 2014, which is the year when EU opened negotiations, until 2020 is 23%. It is a real concern that a country which is moving towards European Union integration is performing such a deterioration of respect for press freedom. Only in 2020, North Macedonia and Albania received the positive decision for opening the negotiations and if this trend would be followed by those countries as well, then the democratic future of the region will face many other added challenges.

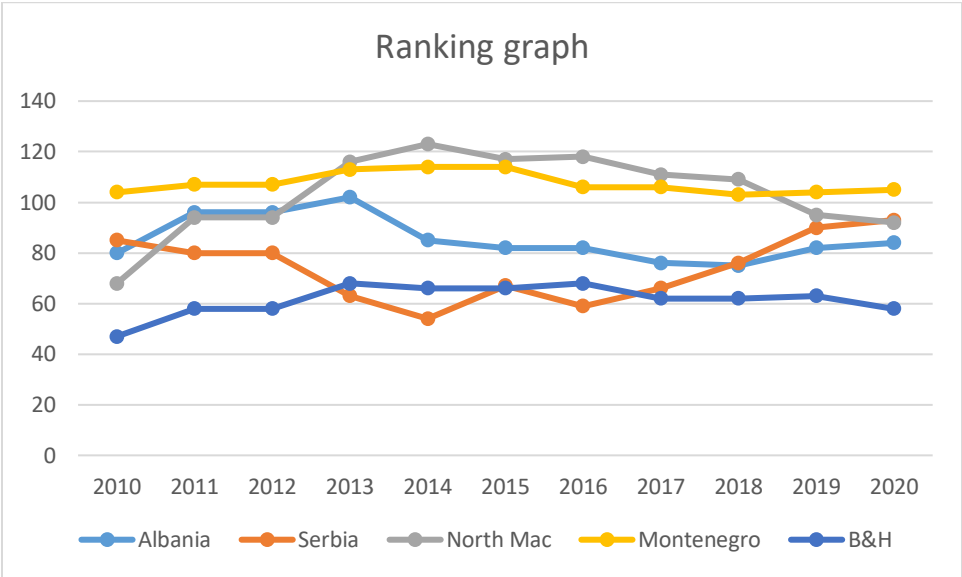
2.6. COMPARISON



The graphs above, when overlapped, show the individual progress or regress of each country in the period of time from 2010 to 2020, but without comparing it with performance of other countries in the region. In this last graph, this paper seeks to introduce this exact thing that was lacking: the comparison between the five countries that were analyzed above. Starting from 2010 we notice that the ranking of the countries that is based on their performance from the best to the worst is: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Macedonia, Albania, Serbia and lastly Montenegro. But in 2011 the ranking changed respectively for Serbia which passes in second place, and Northern Macedonia in third place, followed by Albania and Montenegro again in 5th place. The year 2013 brought changes as well, as the ranking changed completely this time since two countries had scored the same points and they were the best performers from the selected countries, respectively Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina which are in first position for 2013 with 26.86 points . They are followed by Albania, which is followed by Montenegro and on the last place this year was North Macedonia. For 2014, the only difference in it is that Serbia would score less points than the last year, meanwhile Bosnia and Herzegovina would stay with the same points, and automatically it would position itself in the second place for 2014. The year 2015 would restore the old order, Bosnia, Serbia, Albania, Northern Macedonia and lastly Montenegro. And the year 2016 would bring differences between Northern Macedonia and Montenegro, as Montenegro would be placed in fourth position and North Macedonia in fifth position. The year 2017 continued with the same ranking, but in 2018 Albania and Serbia would be positioned in as

the second because both of them scored 31.21 points. In 2019, a new trend would be established, which would be led from Bosnia and Herzegovina followed by Albania, which is followed by Serbia, Northern Macedonia and again the last one would be Montenegro. The 2020 ranking will differ from the progress of North Macedonia, which helped it to get positioned as the third, Bosnia and Herzegovina as the first, Albania as the second, which would be followed by Serbia and Montenegro as the fifth.

2.7. RANKINGS



The graph above shows the performance of the ranking of these five countries by the Press Freedom World Index from 2010 to 2020. The graph easily distinguished the movement in the ranking of these countries over the years. However if we compare this graph with the graph of the points from Reporters Without Borders that has been analyzed above, we can see that the trend of performance is following the same trend, so if we had a decrease of points consequently we had an increase in ranking but if the points increase, the ranking changes by being positioned much lower. Based on the chart above we will analyze the best and worst performances in 2010 and 2020 via taking the ranking into consideration and we could see if over the years the countries have managed to rank higher or lower. The study will begin with Albania which for the 2010 was ranked in the 80th place and then marks the worst performance after 3 years, with a ranking of 102th in 2013. However, Albania’s best performance will be the ranking of 75th in 2018, and unfortunately, Albania could not keep this achievement going as in 2020 it is ranked as the 84th. Bosnia would be the country that reached the best performance in the whole region in 2010 by being ranked as

the 47th and its worst performance in 2014 or 2016 as 68th, and in 2020 it ranked as the 58th with a difference of 11 positions from 2010. While unlike B&H, Montenegro would mark the worst performance in the region in 2014 and 2015 getting ranked as the 114th and its best would be in the 2010 or 2019 as the 104th (progressing significantly) but in 2020 it would be ranked only one position further as the 105. In addition, North Macedonia like Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina marked their best performance in 2010, by being ranked as the 68th but meanwhile in 2014 it would be positioned as worse performance with ranking on 123th. The situation would get improved from 2014 to 2020 by gaining 31 positions or being said differently by being ranked as the 92nd in 2020. The last country to be analyzed is Serbia, which would be ranked as the 85th in 2010, 54th in 2014, thus marking its best performance during this decade, but the situation will be deteriorated from 2014 onwards as in 2020, Serbia ranked as the 93rd , that means with 39 plus positions compared to ranking in 2010.

CHAPTER 3: A DIVE INTO PEOPLE'S THOUGHTS

This part of the thesis will consist of an in depth study constructed out of one survey designed with the purpose of questioning on the performance of the freedom of expression with data collected on the aforementioned five countries in discussion, all located in the Western Balkans: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania. This particular chapter was thought to bring a touch of how the actual people living in these following countries perceive the freedom of expression in their individual and local/national media alike. These results will be faced with the results that have come up from Reporters Without Borders (which were in depth analyzed in the previous chapter) in the time period 2010 to 2020, as well as, to see if the population and NGOs opinion diverge or remain, in actuality, the same.

This survey was carried out online and it was distributed to a selection of people from each of the countries' populations, using a convenience sampling technique and then putting in effect snowball sampling to diversify the income of information as much as possible. The amount of people, the survey was handed to, was carefully controlled to be the same for each of the five nationalities, so that the results would be as close to the reality to the utmost extent and to limit the margin of error as much as it could be, although due to limited resources it had to be kept to small numbers, thus far the results will not be the most accurate, which positively calls for more studies to be carried out in this line of work due to the topic's sensitivity and importance. The total number of the people that participated in this survey was 430, the first batch of people contacted was ten (two persons from each country) and through them the remaining part was contacted, with each of the respondents from the first batch contacting just one person sharing the same nationality with them and so on, until the overall number of respondents was reached. So, at first, all that was needed was one person of each nationality to be contacted and then the snowball sampling technique took over. As already clarified above, the first five people were actually chosen using a convenience sampling technique, so they were all known to the researcher. The survey format will be present at the end of this paper, under Annex , whereas all of the results gathered will be presented as well, and, lastly, the graphs with data from Reporters Without Borders are present in Chapter 2. The survey did not involve any details to be filled by the respondent such as: age, gender, etc; so this account of the gatherings will not be focused in suchlike information as comparing answers to other details to see which part of the population thinks freedom of expression has risen or, alternatively, fallen to other levels.

The survey consists of five questions ranging from individual freedom of expression to how the prospected membership into the European Union currently affects or will affect this fundamental freedom. Although, individual freedom of expression was not very specifically targeted before, these questions were put into the survey with the thought that people would react more organically to questions targeted at them personally, and for which they have personal experiences to delve on, rather than the questions focused on freedom of speech in the media, which although were put into the line of questions, would garner more of a opinionated approach to the answers, rather than plain, blunt answers based on personal experiences. The latter part of the questions, as mentioned, were put into the survey to fall in line with the main idea of this paper, as it is more targeted towards the freedom of speech in press. When presented with the survey, each one of the respondents had to choose between the numbers 0 to 5 as an answer where 0 stood for “no progress” and 5 stood for “drastic progress”; and alternatively, in the remaining questions, between the generic “yes”, “no”, “I do not know”. As the questions of the research have already been referred to in the “Methodology” chapter and later on can be seen in Annex 1, they will not be written here in sake of no repetition.

All of the answers gathered from the questions above were then categorized by country location and put through SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) where all the data was processed and then the final results were gathered appropriately, in order to be of use to this paper. On the following paragraphs, these final results are going to be discussed into what they actually mean for the countries and then compared to each other to see how different populations perceive the rise or fall in the development of the freedom of expression.

According to the data analyzed in the previous chapter compiled by Non-Governmental Organizations, of the countries being studied, the one with the most achieved freedom of expression seems to be Bosnia and Herzegovina and the least Montenegro. Although, it should be said that the differences are not that striking and all five of the countries are very close to one another in terms of this freedom. To make matters worse, it seems that all of the countries had bigger amounts of freedom in 2010 than they do in 2020. Now, this paper is going to target all of the countries starting with Montenegro and ending with Bosnia and Herzegovina, in accordance to their positioning from worst to best, to see if the people think along the same lines as the results that the NGOs provide.

3.1. ALBANIA

The second best country for freedom of expression is, seemingly, Albania. While Albanians seem strikingly more pro-European Union than the previous three, they also report highly negative numbers in other questions. Albania has the second highest percentage of reporting no progress in the freedom of expression for individuals (30%), coming only after Montenegro. It holds a lot of confusion and disagreeableness with the second question of freedom of expression in the media with 35% of the people answering that there has been no progress at all and 20.5% that there has been drastic progress. Again, the numbers are very high in the fourth question, where 65% of Albanians mentioned that they believe that there is no freedom of expression in the media because of the politicians' control over them and continuous meddling. As for the above mentioned naturally positive point of view towards the EU, both of the questions that are directed towards the changes that the EU has brought or can bring to the country have been answered as the following: 60% of the population thinks that the work to fulfill the European Union presented criteria has actually had to do with the improvements in the freedom of expression, and while they as all the other populations in the Western Balkans remain confused with whether becoming a member country will make this freedom better (38%), almost the same amount (37%) answered "Yes", so they believe the issues will become (or will have already become) better once access to the EU has been gained.

The differences between Albania and the other countries are striking at times, especially when taking into account the question about differences that EU criteria presented to the country have made. But, in the other questions it seems pretty much the same: first and second questions' answers are very inconclusive and again with the fourth question the answers are negative. As for the fifth question, the answers are extremely inconclusive, in difference to the other countries that seem slightly more set on their opinions.

3.2. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Lastly, the country that has reported the largest amount of freedom of expression according to Reporters Without Borders in the past year, Bosnia and Herzegovina. This freedom is extremely noticeable in the Bosnians response towards the first question where for the first time in this survey's results, 27% of the respondents have actually answered using number "3" and not "0", meaning a slightly higher percentage of them believe there has been good progress in individual freedom of expression. But, the same numbers are not reflected in the following

questions as the majority of 32% answered the second question as “0”, so no progress at all in the freedom of expression in the media. Also, very little trust can be noted in the European Union seeing as both of the questions focused on it are answered particularly negatively: 42% of people think that the criteria of accession into EU do not have to do at all with the amount of freedom of expression in their country (but that is closely followed by 34% that responded to the question with a “Yes”) and 42% think that the freedom of expression will not experience any big changes when they become a member country of the EU. These results may be very well addressed to the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina is actually the only country of the five being studied here that has yet to gain the candidate status for member of the European Union. Lastly, an astonishing 71.5% of the people think that the media is indeed not free from politicians’ influence which comes as a shock considering that Bosnia and Herzegovina has been noticed as the freest country in the Western Balkans in terms of expression.

Although, the country is ranked as the best in the region in accordance to the criteria on freedom of speech, it seems that the situation is not that positive, at least in the perception of its citizens. What is more noticeable is that the situation is perceived again to be much worse in the media, rather than with the individuals, a repeating pattern throughout the whole region.

3.3. MONTENEGRO

While focusing only on the data gathered for Montenegro, what immediately strikes the observer is the amount of displeasure the people seem to have with their freedom of expression. Each of the scales in the answers are balanced towards negative opinions. The largest percentage of answerers have answered “No” to the fourth question, which means that very few people think that the politicians do not pry into the media and what information reaches the general public. This was by far the largest percentage but that does not mean that any of the other questions has more positive results in the end. More than one fourth of the population (34%) thinks that there has been no development at all in the area freedom of expression as an individual and less that that thinks that there has been made moderate advancements (22%). On the topic of the media, the answers are more varying but they still lean on to no advancements with 30% of respondents answering this way. Almost half of the percentage of the population (43%) thinks that the European Union criteria has not influenced what little to no development there has been in their home country. And, last but not least, the Montenegrins seem to more likely confused over whether their freedom of expression will increase when they enter the EU

as a member country, considering that, again, almost half of the respondents (47%) opted to answer “I don’t know” to the last question.

So, in Montenegro, people seem to be more disappointed with their own lack of freedom, rather than the media’s, although the numbers are pretty close to one another, proving what was written a few paragraphs above, that the real results would be gathered when talking about their own private right to free speech as it is something that they actually can experience in their daily lives and do not need much external information to testify upon. Even larger percentages of displeasure are targeted towards the questions with the European Union serving as a main actor, such seeing that the people do not see it in a good light when it comes to the freedom of speech, thus reflecting the points put forward in the previous chapter, where the countries had much better statistics before they achieved candidate status or opened negotiations with the EU.

3.4. NORTH MACEDONIA

The third in line from worst to best is North Macedonia, with a slightly better score than Serbia, places itself right midway through the countries. The situation seems better in some of the questions and remains almost the same in others. For example, the scales seem to be tipping slightly more on the positive side with the second question with 34% of the respondents thinking that the freedom of expression in the media has made no progress, but on the other hand more have circled the number “1” which means that they see very slight progress being made. Continuing on a positive note, almost half of the respondents (47%) thinks that what progress has been made is thanks to the criteria that EU has imposed on them, making it seem as such that the EU has likely done more than they could have done on their own. But, on the other hand more than half of the population (57%) is not sure whether the freedom of expression will become better when they gain membership in the EU, which may strike as odd considering the answers above. Again now, exactly half of the population also believes that the media is not free from the hands of politicians, which while it stands as a problem, is still lower than the answers gathered from the other two previous countries. As for the first question, the numbers remain almost exactly like Serbia’s with 27% of the people believing that there has been no progress in the freedom of expression for individuals and the remaining answers being very close in percentages.

The Northern Macedonians follow the trend of being separated into small quantities for the first two questions even though the scales noticeably still tip towards the more negative answers. Interestingly enough North Macedonia has the most positive outlook, which should be taken with a grain of salt still, with regard to the fourth question on politicians' corruptive involvement with the media. Other than that, the situation in North Macedonia seems to be pretty neutral, which is given even due to the fact that it presents the middle ground amount the five studied countries of the region.

3.5. SERBIA

Next up in line is Serbia, with very little, barely noticeable, difference from North Macedonia, in the chart provided by Reporters Without Borders gathered data. Again with Serbia, it is noticed that the largest percentage of agreeableness is reached with the fourth question where 70% of the people answered that they do not think that the government is not meddling with what the media presents as information to be digested by the followers. On the other hand, this survey gained the first positive data for this study, with 40% of Serbians thinking that EU presented criteria have something to do with the degree of freedom of expression that they enjoy now, even though this degree may still be on the meager side of the spectrum. Also, similar to Montenegro, it can be seen that Serbians are not set on their beliefs on whether becoming a member country of EU will make their freedom of expression better with 41% answering "I do not know", but 30% answered "No" showing some sort of disbelief in the EU. As for the first two questions, the results maintain slightly negative as 25% of people thinks that their freedom of expression as an individual has not has any progress (followed by 20% that think that it has made a lot of progress, but not the maximum amount) and 45% of Serbians believe that the freedom of expression in media has not made any sort of progress.

What is noted with Serbia is a slightly more positive approach to the European Union, but still remaining on the cautious side, even though its results in the past decade have been some of the worst in the region with regard to its negotiations with the European Union. Despite that, a good part of the people believes that the situation is better with regard to the involvement of the European Union. Again, the opinions are harsh when it comes to the meddlesome quarries believe to have been made by politicians, something that is reflected

throughout the whole region, actually. In some of the questions (1 and 2, specifically), it can be seen that the people have very differentiating opinions as well and the numbers do not stack up highly in one or the other side.

3.6. FINAL THOUGHTS

As the individual analysis is over, this paper is going to transcend into the overall analysis of the difference between the answers that the five populations have given to each of the questions and what it means for them.

The most interesting overall results were gathered in the fourth question where it is obvious that the people lack a stable trust form in the politicians, as the percentages vary 50% (in North Macedonia, which although low, is not comfortably low) to 82% in Montenegro, the latter of which reflects the position estimated by Reporters Without Borders. Seeing as the percentages number at half the represented population or more, the situation is most probably very grave.

As for the highly inconclusive, slightly leaning towards the negative (with the notable exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its meager percentage of positive respondents), the first question, although posed with the intention to see whether the people think their freedom of speech is better now than before, proved to be the one where the survey would result the most difficult in gathering usable information. The most interesting thing in the answer to this question is that the majority of respondents have opted to choose “0” indicating no progress at all, rather than the slightly positive “1”, which shows the degree of distrust in the process.

Whereas, the negative trend continued on the second question’s responses, but not with as much of a visibility as in the fourth question’s results, with Albania surprisingly having the most positive view with around 20% of the respondents choosing answer “5” and the highest percentage of choosing “0” (so, no improvement at all) being chosen by Serbs at an astounding 45% of the population.

As for the two question related to the European Union, it seem that the countries develop a midway relationship between being unsure and positive, with the exception of Bosnia and

Herzegovina which holds negative attitudes in both questions alike and Montenegro which holds a negative attitude only on the third question on whether the EU criteria has contributed to the changes. In the case of Bosnia, this could very well come from the fact that it has yet to achieve what the other countries have achieved in terms of closeness to EU accession. Albania, on the other hand, holds both the least negative and most positive answer percentages in both of the questions.

To conclude, the situation as presented by this chapter, seems to confirm that the freedom of speech is not meeting the expectations of progress that it should have, considering that most of the countries have already gotten their “green lights” from the European Union and this lack of development could mean that the process of accession could be a lengthy and tiring one for all the parties in participation.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to have a closer look on the performance of freedom of expression on five countries of the Western Balkans, and to compare this performance with their progress toward EU, and measuring the compliance of conditionality criteria has been one of the pillars on the research. Based on the mixed research method strategy that was used, the result has been that the performance of freedom of expression on this region has not been limiting their integration toward EU, even though the countries have not been complying with EU conditionality criterion of this field. After analyzing the reports of European Commission, comparing the data from Reports Without Borders and the conduction of a survey on the population of the five countries in order to have their approach to this topic as well, the conclusion is that human right conditionality is not being considered as one of the main reasons why a country should process further into the European Union.

According to the reports of European Commission, the result that came out was that there has been some progress mainly on adapting several media reforms on the respective parliaments, improving transparency on media ownership or creating some commission to investigate cases of intimidation against journalists, but on the other hand there has been an ongoing level on intimidation cases (sometimes even going on a higher level such as on the Albanian case), increase of political control over media and continuation of lack of editorial independence etc.

The data provided by Reporter Without Borders are very precise and clear, by creating a very easy view to be analyze the graphs and to come to the conclusion that all the countries has been regressing judging on their performance on press freedom.

And the third chapter which has been the new reveal of this research, the opinion of the population of those countries on freedom of expression has been almost along the same lines with data gathered by Reporters Without Borders, by making it clear, that majority of them has seen no progress on freedom of expression in their countries during 2010-2020.

Unfortunately, those were the results that came out of this research but it is worthy to mention that this research has faced a lot of limitations mostly related to the period of time on

which it was conducted so further research work needs to be done. More attention should be given to this fundamental human right, especially on the pre-integration and post-integration phase of candidate member country of the EU. Even though the research came with the results that the countries have been performing badly on the freedom of expression and the compliance with conditionality criteria is very weak, some recommendations could be added on what countries should do in order to satisfy the conditionality criteria and to achieve the needed progress on press freedom:

Albania should abolish the new law “Regulation of online media” which is against international standards, immediately implement Labor Rights for journalists and media employees, enforce restrictions on media ownership through a new law based on international standards and achieve transparency on public advertising.

Secondly, Bosnia and Herzegovina should come up with a serious institutional strategy on cases of intimidation, harmonize the entities’ legislation with the state-level law on media’s functioning and ensure the independence and transparency on public advertising.

Thirdly, Montenegro should address the institutional response on intimidation cases as well. But, it should, also, ensure financial and editorial independence on the public broadcaster, along with the establishment of an effective media self-regulatory body.

Fourthly, even though North Macedonia is one of the countries which has been progressing more recently there is still a lot more to do such as ensuring a fair pluralism on media industry, taking incentives to raise the respect for professional and ethical code, implementing the right follow up strategy on cases of intimidation and progressing with the reform on public broadcaster.

Lastly, Serbia should take steps to improve its media community security and funding for public broadcaster, manage to implement the media law package and strengthen the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media.

Clearly, the process of integration is a long one but in order to avoid the Polish or Hungarian scenario where democracy and respect for human rights are facing a serious thread, the abovementioned reforms should be implemented as soon as possible. It is time for the European Union to put democracy and human rights first, because a region which is packed with minorities would never be stable without respect for minority rights, and allowing those countries to go

further into the Union even though they have not comply the conditionality criteria is a guarantee for inner unrests in the future.

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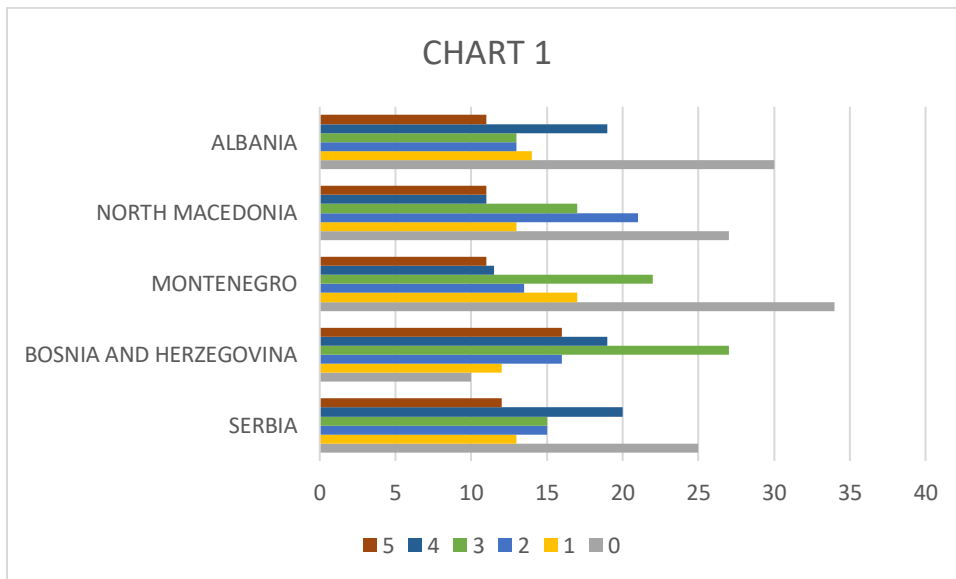
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ANNEX

The survey conducted on the population of the five countries, consisted on five question. Two of those questions had the possibility of the answers of 0(no progress) to 5(drastic progress). While three of them would be with the possibility of the answers: Yes, No or I do not know. Below is going to be attached the question and the results for every question.

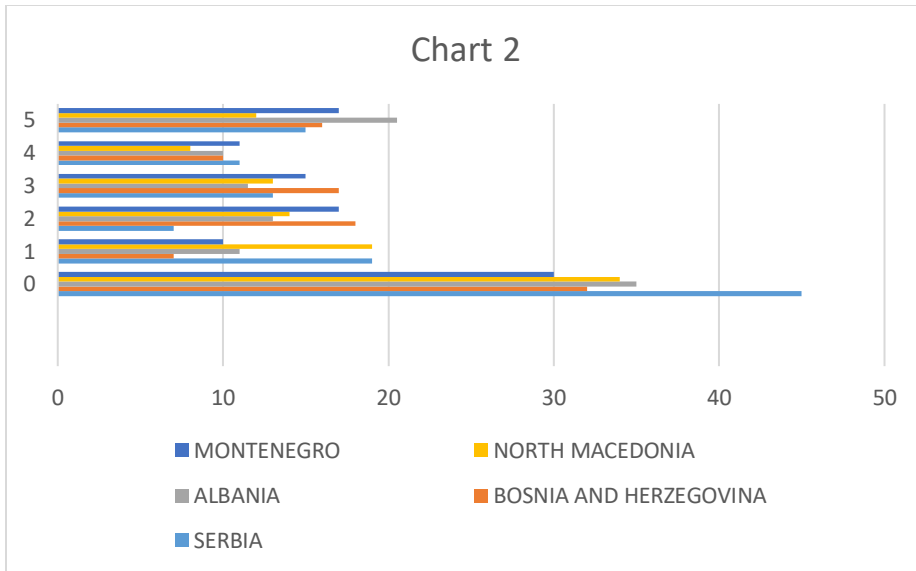
Question 1:

Do you think that during the period of time 2011-2019 your freedom of expression as individual has been progressed?



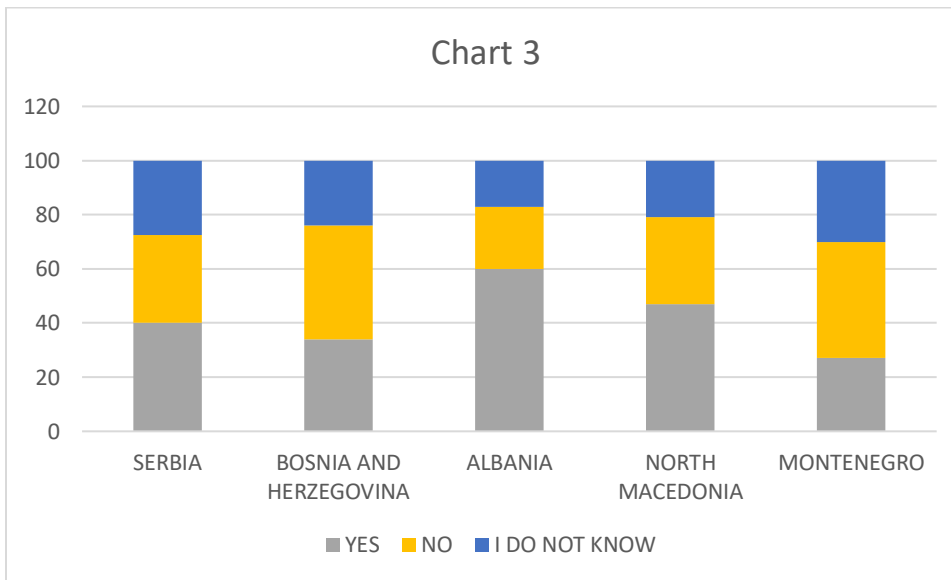
Question 2:

Do you think that that during the period of time 2011-2019 the media is becoming freer and more independent?



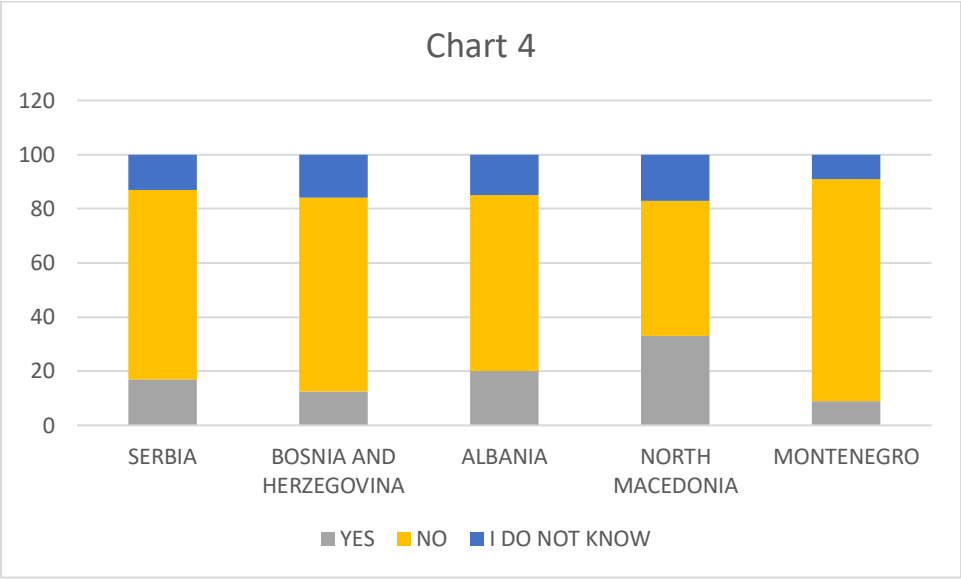
Question 3:

Do you think that EU integration criteria has influenced your government's initiatives related to media in your country?



Question 4:

Do you think that media nowadays in your country is independent and not influenced by politicians?



Question 5:

Do you think that freedom of expression in your country will be increased if your country will gain the EU member country status?

