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Broadcasting Shake-up

Many of the unregulated electronic media launched during the Bosnian conflict are now facing the axe.

By Julie Harbin in Sarajevo (BCR No. 275, 29-Aug-01)

Bosnia is seeking to cut back the huge number of private radio and television stations which now jam its airways with inflammatory broadcasts, in a further stride towards stability.

With 210 radio and 71 TV stations competing to serve an audience of four million people, the country now has the densest frequency network in Europe. It is a legacy of wartime, when the leaders of Serb, Croat and Bosniak communities handed out licenses at random and permitted broadcasters to deliver unrestrained, virulent propaganda.

Now most of these stations cannot compete commercially in the new economic climate. And the ones which can will be obliged to comply with Western standards of democratic impartiality. Those that don't will be closed.

Bosnia's independent Communications Regulatory Agency, CRA, under the guidance of top international officials, is in charge of determining which stations survive. It is expected to close down between one half and two thirds of the present broadcasters.

Last October the agency launched the process of issuing new long-term licenses (2-years for public broadcasters and 5-years for private broadcasters) based on strict financial, technical, and programme content criteria.

Early results of the culling process sent a shiver through the broadcasting community. In the Tuzla region, only 23 of 62 stations won a license. In Brcko, 32 out of 47 and in Doboj 38 out of 73.

Rejected broadcasters complained bitterly that the CRA standards were too rigid. But Western officials and many Bosnians believe the reform is long overdue. They argued that highly partisan broadcasting has been hindering progress to peace and reconciliation.

The CRA's forerunner, the Independent Media Commission, IMC, was created in 1998 by the Office of the High Representative, OHR, as the broadcasting regulatory body for the whole of Bosnia. Its mission was to foster development of democratic media.

The IMC council consisted of four Bosnian nationals and three internationals.

The body drew up a broadcasting code of practice and issued provisional licenses to television and radio stations that agreed to follow it. Those who violated it were penalised with either an official rebuke or the suspension of their license.

In March, the OHR merged the IMC with the Telecommunications Regulatory Agency, TRA, to become the CRA. Critics complained that the OHR had too much control. Although this influence has been reduced, it retains the power to frame regulations and even impose decisions over the head of the CRA.

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Such international involvement insulated the CRA from local political influence but undermined its standing as a truly Bosnian agency.

"At the moment it remains an international body," a Western source close to CRA told IWPR. "The question is whether the agency will be allowed enough power to maintain the respect and admiration of the broadcasting community."

Despite widespread agreement that the CRA must reform and reduce the number of broadcasting stations, critics says its decisions lack clarity. Broadcasters who lost their licenses complained that the body didn't provide enough information to help them prepare their appeals. For example, only three of the 42 stations turned down in Tuzla won on appeal.

The CRA insisted that its process was "firmly based upon established legal principles recognised in all democratic states".

The media assistant to Bosnia's federal ombudsman, Mehmed Halilovic, accused the CRA of losing patience with applicants who failed to fill out the forms correctly. In a letter to the president of the body in March, Halilovic recommended that the agency should become more transparent. "Radio and TV stations cannot offer all necessary data if they do not know what criteria the IMC is using," Halilovic wrote.

Better knowledge of CRA criteria will probably not help much, since few broadcasters can meet the very strict requirements, anyway. Halilovic and other local officials have suggested that CRA should loosen its technical and financial criteria while retaining strict control over programme content.

Meeting financial requirements will be painful, said Elvir Svrakic, director of the independent Sarajevo station, NTV Hayat, and president of the Bosnian Association of Electronic Media. "We are fighting for clients, for every penny," he said. The station, which is likely to be among those to be granted licenses, is only just surviving commercially, and has no money for better programmes, new equipment and higher salaries.

When the station started during the war, it was closely tied with the ruling Bosniak (Muslim) Party for Democratic Action, SDA, and aired mostly Islamic propaganda. As the political environment in Bosnia started to shift over the past couple of years, it began to criticise the party. This led SDA-controlled state enterprises to divert their advertisements from TV Hayat to the official federation television.

Now, the station's running costs are partially funded by the Sarajevo canton. A news talk-show was last year financed by the US government.

While NTV Hayat is expected to get a clean bill of health from the CRA, radio and television station Studio 99, headed by Adil Kulenovic, looks to have failed its medical. It was denied a Tuzla region license, due to "bad financial results", and it doesn't look as though it will get one for Sarajevo either.

Ironically, Kulenovic was lauded during the war as one of very few independent broadcasters to criticise the Bosnian government. As a result, his station was once burned down and its transmitter destroyed by political enemies. He has always refused political party funding, fearing it would damage the channel's independence.

Like many wartime broadcasters, he transmitted movies and foreign serials without paying for them. Now he can't do that. Films, sitcoms, and soap-operas draw more advertising, but cost too much money. In their place, he continues to voice his alternative opinions through a dull news talk-show.

According to Kulenovic, Studio 99 hasn't paid rent since January 2000, or salaries since December 2000. Many of the journalists, who often worked for free during the war, have left. The station isn't internationally funded, although during and after the war UNESCO donated technical equipment and documentaries and facilitated journalist training.

The media situation has been even worse in Bosnian Serb and Croat territories where most stations, in addition to their poor financial performance, are strongly politically aligned.

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infrastructure, independent, ATV Banja Luka seems to be an exception. Its broadcasts can be seen in the Federation, the Republika Srpska, and parts of Croatia and Serbia.

ATV received equipment from the US, and the Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency continues to support 40 per cent of its running costs. Employees are paid on time, but even with this aid, running ATV is difficult, says its director Natasa Tesanovic.

"The market is poor and competition is huge," she said, referring to the seven private TV stations and state broadcasters based in the city.

In Herzegovina, historic stronghold of Bosnian Croat extremism, most of the media is controlled and usually financed by the hard-line Croat Democratic Union party. Even journalists who are not under direct party control are often pressured into broadcasting party propaganda.

However, a new private radio station emerged in July 1999 in the still-divided city of Mostar. According to its founders, Studio88 was started to represent all the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The channel's director and co-owner, Amna Popovac, a computer technology engineer, launched the channel with her own money, which she saved by working for an international organisation.

She continues to pay the station's running costs. Studio 88 has cooperated with channels on both sides of the Croat-Bosniak divide to secure advertising contracts. She believes it is the only way for a commercial station to survive in this politically and economically volatile market.

Popovac is hopeful that multi-ethnic private stations will survive despite efforts by extremist politicians to make businesses advertise with stations that reflect their political bias.

Julie Harbin is a Sarajevo-based freelance reporter and frequent contributor to IWPR.

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