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# POLICY BRIEF

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## PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA IN COUNTRIES WITH FRAGILE DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE: THE CASE OF KOSOVO

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### Who is this aimed at

- EU policymakers, scholars, and media professionals interested in public service media regulation and independence

### Key messages

- Public Service Media (PSM) plays an important role in democratic processes
- There is a need of protecting the independence of PSM in relation to technologies, as digitalisation affects the media industry
- New methods of tailoring content have emerged to appeal to Gen-Z as intended audience

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### Introduction

In the era of the internet, with the rapid evolvement of innovative technologies, digitalisation continues to affect the media industry. Meanwhile, platform regulation, which has been at the center of the debate of policymakers and digital scholars (Gorwa, 2019), still has loopholes, despite regulations in place, mainly by European Institutions. Regulating the digital space has proven to be hardly answered only through vertical governance. Public Service Media (PSM) has a public responsibility and a strong role to play in democratic practices on freedom of media and the right to be informed.

This policy brief discusses the need to safeguard the independence of PSM within the current trends and technologies. It discusses the new form of tailoring content accordingly to audience needs by having in target the generation of Zillennials, known as Gen-Z. Kosovo is the specific case in this brief, because of its specifics of a country with the youngest population in Europe, with multiple social and political that challenge on country's path to building a sustainable democracy. It discusses what role can the public broadcaster play in a small-sized and divided ethnicities environment, while providing a vibrant and pluralist media market.

## Independence secures public trust in PSM

With the outbreak of COVID-19, trust in public service media has increased in the industrialised world, but not in industrialising countries. In countries with independent public service media, consumption of news was higher, while this pattern is less clear in non-Western Europe, where the pandemic crisis has not dominated the media agenda (Newman, 2021).

The independence of the PSM is still a challenge at the European level. Keeping independence from government, party politics, and economic interests is considered one of the most important and the most delicate challenges for Public Service Media. Journalistic credibility is undeniably dependent on this type of independence (ORF Public Value, 2022).

To keep the public trust, PSM needs to obtain independence. A publication of the European Audiovisual Observatory focused on the Governance and Independence of PSM and states that independence should be addressed on different levels: structurally, supervisory, managerial, and editorial. By citing the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) the publication emphasises the need for accountability and transparency to obtain public trust. EBU says that PSM should engage with the public not only by presenting its activities but also by seeking feedback. Keeping a permanent link with organizations, communities, and civil society in reflecting users' opinions on providing services (Blázquez, Cappello, Milla, Valais, 2022).

While PSM independence remains a challenge at the European level, media freedom is regulated by European media law and by national constitutions, and is interpreted as a fundamental right. The "Freedom of Media Act" is an EU initiated regulatory change to reflect on the new reality created by the digitalisation of the media industry, and other events and phenomena characterising the 21st century. It also addresses the need to safeguard and foster the independence of PSM.

For a comprehensive approach, complex topics require to zoom-in cases. This policy brief uses the case of Kosovo and briefly explains how a post-conflict country handles democracy and the digital age all at once, and why it is important to have strong, independent, and professional public service media, to protect democracy in such a complex transition period.

## Multiple political and social challenges: Kosovo Context

Kosovo is the youngest country in Europe, with the youngest population where half of whom from all communities are under the age of 25, and belongs to generation Z. At the same time, it is amongst the countries with the highest internet penetration throughout its territory: 91% of the population uses internet devices and over one million social media users, equivalent to 57% of its population (Kemp, 2021) Considering that half of the population is youth might explain the reasons behind such a high percentage of internet use, as it remains an important "window open" to the outside world. A report by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) describes the media landscape in Kosovo as diverse and with limited developments to a small size and strict separations across ethnic lines (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). What is more, the internet remains an unregulated area, and this is an issue not only for Kosovo, but it is a global challenge that yet has not been addressed in a sustainable way.

Kosovo declared independence on February 17, 2008, nine years after the end of the conflict with Serbia. Regarding Kosovo's recognition, there are split opinions globally and within the European Union. Five EU states (Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Slovakia, and Romania) out of 27 have not yet recognised Kosovo's legal status. Globally, as of July 2022, Kosovo is recognised as an independent state by a total of 99 nations, out of 193 UN member states (World population review, 2022[1] Kosovo has a population of around 1.8 million, where 92% of the population are ethnic Albanians, 6% are Serbian minorities, and the rest are Bosnians, Gorans, Turks, and Roma (World Population Review, 2023)[2].

## Engaging the Gen-Z in the digital democracy

Public Service Media is associated with the concepts of citizenship and democracy, culture, and pluralism (Sarikakis, 2010). The need to be informed and civilly engaged is not an idiosyncratic tendency, but rather, a function of social, economic, and educational factors, for citizens of all eras. (Papacharissi, 2011). The Fourth Estate has acknowledged the irreversible fact that the fifth power which is social media is here to stay. Legacy media has been challenged by the world of the internet, ever since social media platforms became content producers and aggregators. Legacy media gradually has begun to use this public space and share its content, by combining quality (by applying journalistic standards) and innovation (by following the contemporary trends applied to innovative technology). Citizen journalism has also grown with social media use, but at the same time, so has grown the tendency to share content that may not be fact-checked and without editorial control (Tambini et al., 2008). Legacy media has the potential to take this space and continue applying journalistic standards and principles, by tailoring its content to new devices and platforms, for the younger audience. The internet is an ocean that the youth is diving into, and Generation Z known as “zoomers” which make up 30% of the global population is the digital generation (Dolot, 2018). Scholars argue that Gen-Z is the most technologically adept generation and is highly connected to the social media web (Mahapatra et al., 2022). The digital generation is described as ‘skim and view’, rather than ‘read and explore’ (Currah, 2009), and yet researchers characterise generation Z as a group of truth-seekers and critical thinkers. An analysis shows that in Germany, mainstream media has adopted its content to social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, (Hase et al., 2022). Another research examines funding models and organizational legacy that shape news organizations’ social media strategies and makes a comparison of public service and private sector media in six European countries. Findings show that PSM shared more content on platforms compared to commercially oriented outlets (Sehl et al. 2021). In Kosovo, only 7% of Gen-Z (age 18 to 24) use television as an item to watch media content (news, movies, shows), this percentage is even lower than 4% of teenagers (age 13 to 17). The Digital News Report 2021, published by Reuters Institute, conducted in six different continents and 46 various markets, demonstrates that young people in Western European nations between the ages of 18 and 24 feel underrepresented in the media and that their interests are not given enough attention. This may be an explanation of the reasons why this group tends to use social media as a source of information (Newman, 2021). Concerns over the accuracy and tendency to mislead readers are at the center of debate from media, policymakers, and civil society to citizens themselves. The term “fake news” refers to false and distorted news materials, and it is not a new term as former U.S. President Donald Trump claims to “invent” and has used it to discredit media critics (BBC report, 2018). Nevertheless, some scholars argue that “fake news” gives mainstream quality journalism the opportunity to show that it has value based on expertise, ethics, engagement, and experience. It is a wake-up call to be more transparent, and relevant, and add value to people’s lives. (Beckett, 2017). At the same time, these findings increase the need to become more vigilant and look at where this process is leading us, and to what extent can the environment within the media be controlled or regulated without harming democracy.

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[1] Ongoing negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia have led to February 27, 2023, when state leaders reached an agreement for the normalization of relations. Two complex points in this agreement are: setting up a Serbian minority legal body with executive power in Kosovo and preventing Serbia from interfering in the integration of Kosovo into international organizations and bodies (Belgrade- Pristina, EU proposal, February 27, 2023). Yet de-jure state recognition of Kosovo from Serbia may be considered done in acquiescence but since it is not explicitly written in the EU proposal, it remains unclear and challenging for the normalization process.

[1] Kosovo remains the only country in Europe with a visa regime applied to its citizens for the Schengen zone. As a result, a considerable number of the Kosovo population has applied for dual citizenship in the regional countries, mainly in Albania and Serbia, and in rare cases in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia (BIRN, 2010, 2019). European Council adopted a position on March 9, 2023, on visa-free travel for holders of passports issued by Kosovo (European Council, Kosovo, 2023). This rule will allow Kosovo citizens as the last in the Western Balkan region to travel freely to the EU territory from January 1st, 2024.

## Challenges to regain independence for Kosovo public service media

The Kosovo public broadcaster-RTK is the only media in Kosovo that provides services in five languages (Albanian, Serbian, Turkish, Bosnian, and Romani). The first channel provides service in all languages with Albanian dominating, the second channel provides services in the Serbian language only, and the third channel is informative and is in Albanian only.

As a national media giant, the public broadcaster carries out on its shoulders the responsibility to provide accuracy, transparency, impartiality, and above all education of the society. In Kosovo, the public broadcaster Radio Television of Kosovo, established in 2000, used to have a strong role in information and opinion-making, but in the state-building process, RTK has lost its independence, firstly by becoming deprived of public financial resources, and later politicisation of the executive board. These concerns have been addressed in each EU progress report (European Commission, 2018). Even today, financial independence remains unregulated, keeping the RTK under the government's financial control. Determination of financial resources should ensure the independence of the public broadcaster. To perform its function free of economic constraints, the public broadcaster must be financed by a fee (ORF Public Value, 2022). In the case of Kosovo, the public fee was removed in 2011, with the constitutional court's decision, considering the form of tax collection as unconstitutional (Kosovo Constitutional Court, RTK case, 2011). Yet, even now the financial status of RTK remains unregulated, and as such, the issue is unconstitutional because for each state there is a constitutional duty to protect the freedom of public broadcasters (ORF Public Value, 2022). PSM fees are a constant debate throughout Europe. In the UK, the government took the decision to freeze the BBC license fee for the next two years and consider scrapping it after 2027, framing the BBC fee as a cost of living (Edwards, 2022). Historically, there is constant pressure on PSM to be 'friendlier' to the market demand and private media, something that creates circumstances for state dependency (Sarikakis, 2010). In the case of Kosovo, it will be even more challenging for the government to reintroduce such public tax and consequently will continue to have the RTK under its budget line.

### Policy recommendations

This policy brief recommends to the Kosovo public broadcaster (Radio Television of Kosovo-RTK) increase the quality of service and become more competitive in the media market.

What the RTK should do is create its own platform of channels which include: information, education, sports, entertainment and each channel should provide subtitles in all languages used in Kosovo in all its TV channels, including on its website. The development of Artificial Intelligence makes this process workable and with lower costs.

To regain public trust, the public broadcaster should improve the level of accountability and transparency. As recommended by the EBU the public broadcaster should put in place a regulatory framework that defines for what it should be accountable and as well engage with the public, not just by informing the public about its activities but also seek feedback and reflect it on its organizational framework. Annual reports and other relevant financial documents should be accessible on the website (Blázquez et. al, 2022). Such intervention can minimise the voices that tend to present the PSM as misusing public funds, designing an irrelevant program to the public, and being biased.

Youth engagement and representation remain a gap that needs to be addressed, regionally and at the European level. Adoption of the click-bite trend to attract advertisers seems to be a hard transition for legacy media.

And this increases the necessity for public broadcasters to play a crucial role in regulating the media market, by raising the standard of service, producing quality journalism by employing ethical standards and impartiality, and adopting its platforms to its targeted audience. By setting such standards, in the example of Kosovo, RTK could regain its trust and increase viewership, and to some degree can trigger other media outlets to improve their quality of production, as a matter of competition.

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- provides an impetus for future oriented thinking, by researching the needs and perceptions of Europe's future autonomous citizens, young people and in particular children for factual information in and about Europe
- mobilises knowledges and competencies of a range of experts and especially aiming to "hear from" stakeholders which have historically been permitted least input to questions of right to accurate and comprehensive information as a civil and human right.

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