



Final Research Report on the Results of
LOCAL MEDIA
FOR BETTER SOCIETY
and Recommendations for Local Media



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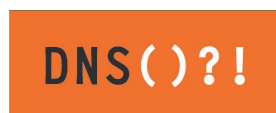
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1. Introduction

The project Local Media for Better Society, led by the Trade Union of Croatian Journalists, in partnership with BH Journalists Association, Independent Journalist's Association of Serbia (IJAS), Slovene Association of Journalists (SAJ), and funded by the British Embassy in Zagreb, aims to provide cooperation and strengthening of independence of local media in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia. One of the goals of the project was to form a team of researchers from four countries who would carry out a content analysis of different local media outlets and conduct interviews with five local media editors. The researchers in the project were Daniela Jurčić (University of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina), Dina Vozab (University of Zagreb, Croatia), Sanja Kljajić (University of Novi Sad, Serbia) and Tjaša Turnšek (Pecae Institute, Slovenia). This report is written based on the analysis made by researchers and discussions about the results during workshops with media experts Sabina Mihelj and Václav Štětka, and local media representatives.

2. Methodology

The analysis consisted of two parts – content analysis of five local media outlets per country and interviews with the editors of these media outlets. Each of the country teams in the project (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia) chose five local media for the content analysis. There were some common criteria for the case selection. Online media were chosen for the analysis, regardless of whether they also have a print form, or if they are digital-only media. It was also recommended to achieve a sort of diversity in the country with the choice of media. For example, selected local media should reflect regional diversity and smaller and larger urban environments. Local media outlets selected for the analysis are listed in Table 1.

The proposed sample for the analysis consisted of top 10 articles published on the home page of each news website at 4 PM on the following dates: 7 February 2022 (Monday), 15 February 2022 (Tuesday), 23 February 2022 (Wednesday), 3 February 2022 (Thursday), 11 February 2022 (Friday), 19 February 2022 (Saturday), and 27 February 2022 (Sunday). The home page of each news website was downloaded and archived at 4 PM on the chosen dates. A media article was the unit of analysis. The coding matrix was preliminarily tested before the start of the analysis. Some of the categories in the coding matrix were “main theme of the article,” “main protagonists in the article,” “does the article have a local focus,” “does the article tackle issues of democracy, human rights or peace building” etc. The final sample size in Bosnia and Herzegovina was 350, 340 in Croatia, 345 in Serbia, and 314 in Slovenia (a total sample of 1349 articles).¹

Table 1. Number of analyzed articles in selected local media outlets

Country	Local media outlet	Number of analyzed articles
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Bljesak	70
	Kozarski vjesnik	70
	Medijski servis	70
	Radio Sarajevo	70
	Rtv USK	70
Croatia	Dalmacija Danas	70
	E-međimurje	70
	Glas Istre	70
	Glas Slavonije	70
	Zagreb.info	60
Serbia	O21.rs	70
	Boom93	70
	Južne vesti	66
	Ozonpress	70
	Radio 100 plus	69
Slovenia	Dolenjski list	69
	Gorenjski glas	67
	Lokalec.si	54
	Novi tednik	57
	Primorske novice	67

¹ In Serbia and Slovenia, articles which were on the home page of the news websites for a few days, and which were repeated in the sample, were omitted from the analysis. In Croatia, a broken link was downloaded for the analysis of Zagreb.info on February 7 2022, so the articles published on this day could not be analyzed.

Interviews were held throughout February with editors of the five chosen local media outlets per country. The interview guide was used by all countries in the analysis. The interview guide was divided into three topics: general introduction, attitudes towards the role of local media in democracy, human rights, and peace building, and finally, perceived influences and pressures on journalistic work in local media. Researchers also prepared a template that was sent to the local media outlets, in which they asked for information about the organizational structure, sources of funding and employment. In some countries, representatives of local media refused to participate in the research, so five interviews were not held across all four countries. For example, in Croatia, some potential interviewees declined to participate out of fear that they would be recognized in their local community, in case the report of this research showed the media outlet in which they work in a bad light. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there was also a lot of reluctance, and some hostility expressed towards the research. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, three interviews were held via e-mail. In Croatia, two interviews were held, one in person and one over the telephone. In Serbia, all five interviews were held. In Slovenia, four interviews were held in person, and one via e-mail.

This research has several limitations. **The sample in the content analysis is small and cannot be used for a wider generalization of the results.** The research was conducted in February 2022, so the results of the analysis also might reflect some of the events which were predominant in this period, like the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Therefore, some of the results might reflect these specific events (e.g. greater focus on health than in other periods), and not be entirely representative of the themes local media outlets usually focus on. Moreover, five researchers coded the material, and no intercoder reliability analysis was done. Therefore, although one coding matrix was used, researchers discussed all of the coding categories before the research and test coding was conducted, it is possible that different coders used different criteria for coding certain categories.

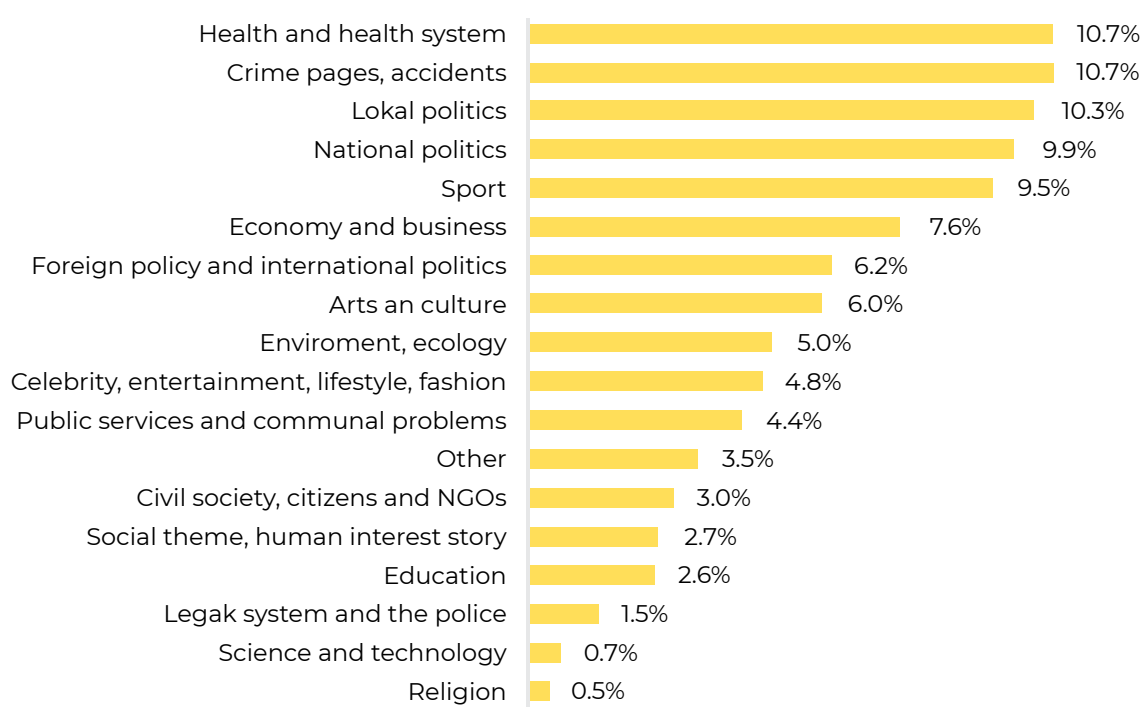
3. Results from the content analysis

News articles were most commonly written in the form of news reports (58.1%) and short information (34.8%). In the whole sample, the most common author of an article was an original author with a clearly stated name (30,5%). However, countries greatly differed in this respect. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, the identity of the author of the article was not clear in most of the published articles – in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 43.1% of the articles, the local media outlet was signed as the author, while in Croatia, in 30.3% of articles, there was an original author with no clear identity (e.g. signed only with initials). In both Serbia and Slovenia, most of the articles had an original author with a clearly stated name (42.9% in Serbia and 39.2% in Slovenia). Stories were mostly driven by current events (73%). Only 16% of stories were driven by an original media initiative, and 11% of the stories were initiated by pseudo-events (e.g. press conferences).

In all of the countries, **articles mostly dealt with themes with a local focus** (62% in the entire sample). However, there is a possible **lack of diversity in themes in local media** (see Picture 1). The most common themes were health and the health system (10.7%, possibly because of news about the Covid-19 pandemic), followed by crime pages and accidents (10.7%), and local politics (10.3%). According to this analysis, certain themes which could be important for the local community are usually not set high on the local media agenda (e.g. religion, science and technology, education, social themes, civil society). On the other hand, crime pages and accidents are very often the main topic in all of the countries.

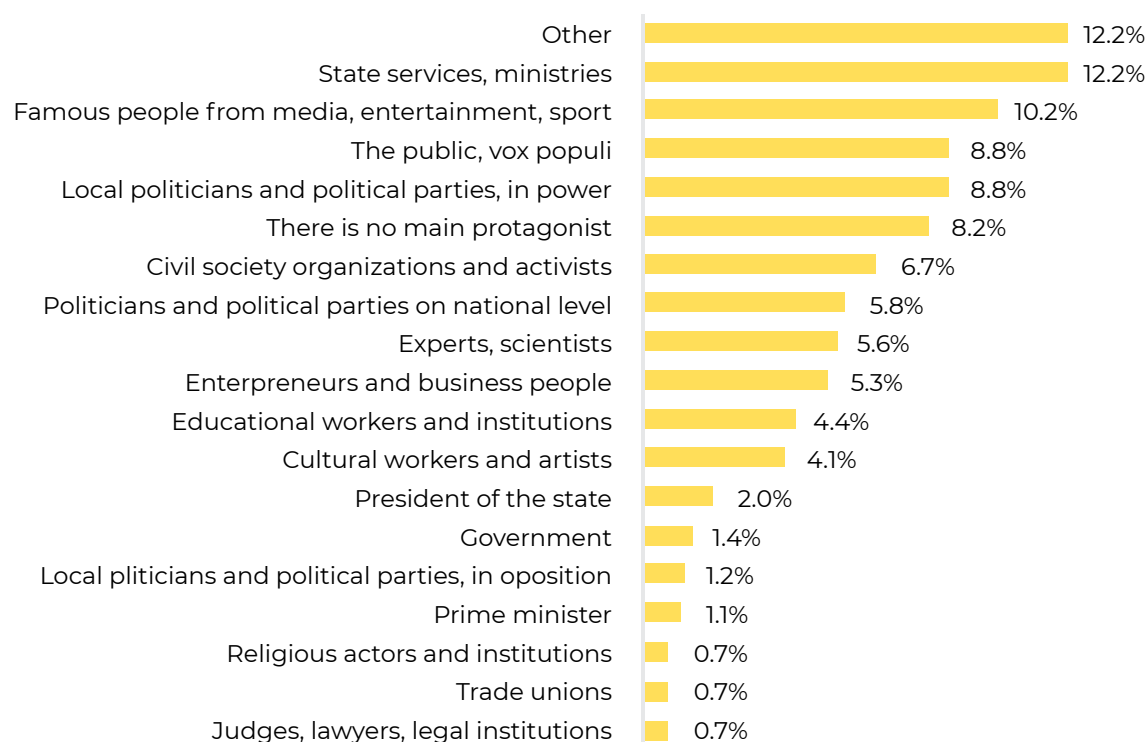
Analyzed local media outlets in all of the countries **did not focus on issues of democracy, human rights and peace building in their stories** (this was found in only 5% of all articles). Most such articles were dedicated to peace building (12 articles), rights of people with disabilities (9), rights of children and youth (9) and democracy (9). The least attention is given to women's rights (3 articles) and rights of migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers (4).

Picture 1. Main theme of the article, the entire sample of local media outlets (N=1349)



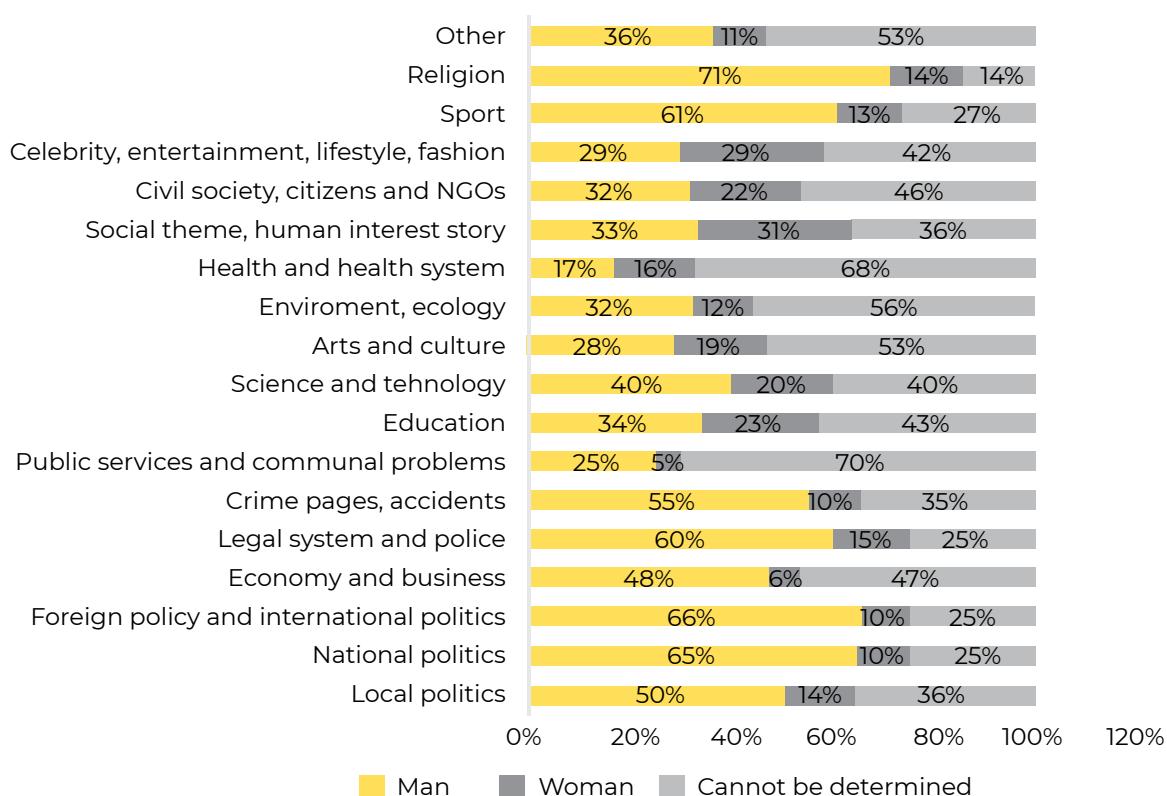
As most of the articles focus on local themes, they also **focus more on local actors** (49%). However, there is also a lack of diversity in representation of main protagonists in articles in local media (see Picture 2). **The most represented protagonists are elites** (e.g. state services, famous people, politicians etc.). However, it is positive that the **public is a common main protagonist in local media** (in 8.8% of articles; an exception is Slovenia, where little focus is given to the public). Some of the actors which are very important for the local community are not represented. For example, although a lot of space is dedicated to local politicians in power (8.8%), **very little space is dedicated to local politicians in opposition** (1.2%).

Picture 2. Main protagonist in the article, the entire sample of local media outlets (N=1349)



Most of the **main protagonists in all of the countries are men** (women are main protagonists in only 13.7% of news stories). Men are represented the most as main protagonists in news stories about religion, international and national politics, sports, the legal system and the police, crime, and local politics. Women are represented in equal amount or more than men only in articles about celebrities and entertainment. They are somewhat represented in articles about civil society, human interest stories, stories about health, science, and education, but men are represented more often as main protagonists in these stories as well.

Picture 3. Gender representation across different themes of articles, the entire sample of local media outlets (N=1349)

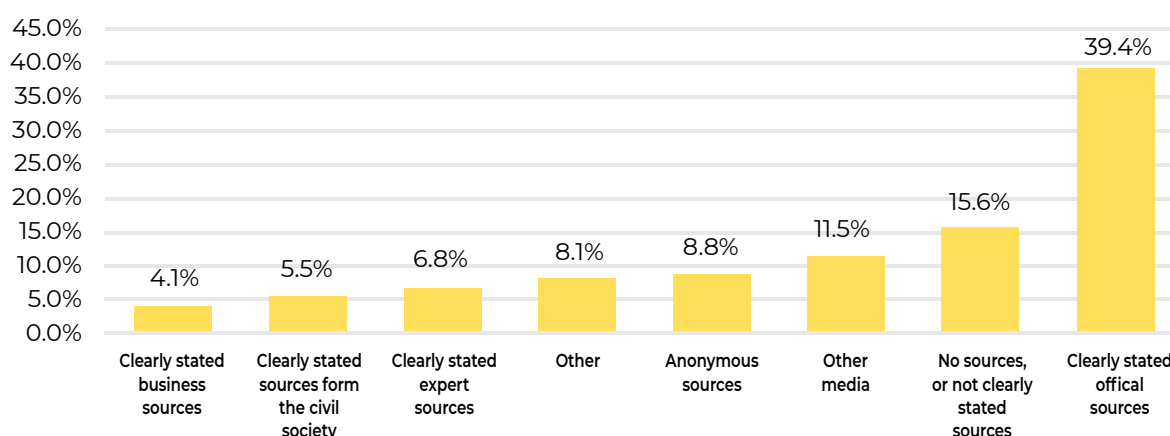


In the content analysis, it was also analyzed to what extent do local media succumb to using sensationalism in their articles. In the total sample, 89% of articles had an informative title, while 10% had a clickbait or sensationalist title. Although there were some differences, in all of the countries, **most of the articles could not be evaluated as clickbait or sensationalist.** In Slovenia, there was a higher share of sensationalist or clickbait titles (27.4%). As intercoder reliability was not performed, it is difficult to assess how much of these differences could perhaps be attributed to different criteria used by different coders in evaluating sensationalism.

Researchers also analyzed sources which are used for constructing stories in local media. In the entire sample, **15.6% of articles did not use any sources for the story** (or the sources were not clearly mentioned). The share of stories without a source was the highest in Serbia (20.6%) and Slovenia (20.1%). There was a low variety of sources used. **In 72.9% of articles, only one source was used for the story.** Most used sources in the four countries were official sources (39.4%), followed by other media that were used as sources for a story (11.5%). Official sources were used the most in stories about local politics (18.6% in the entire sample), stories about health and the health system (16.4%) and stories about crime and accidents (16.2%). Sources from civil society were usually quoted in news stories about civil society (31.1%), and business sources in stories about economy and business (60%). Expert sources were used the most in stories about arts and culture (18.6%) and health and the health system (16.3%).

There is a high prevalence of anonymous sources in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where in 25.4% of articles, the main source is anonymous. This was less of a problem in other countries. There was also a rather high percentage of sources from the category “other” (8.1%). In Croatia, most sources from this category were various websites or social media posts, in other countries, researchers also listed “ordinary citizens” as common sources in this category. Experts, sources from civil society and from economy and business are less represented as sources of the news stories. Given that the research was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is possible that experts had been even less represented as sources prior to the pandemic.

Picture 4. Main sources of the news story in local media, the entire sample of local media outlets (N=1349)



4. Results from the interviews

4.1. Organizational structure, ownership, financing, and employment

Through interviews, three main problems were noted in terms of ownership and sources of funding of local media. First, there is a **problem of untransparent public financing of local media**, which is especially pronounced in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, participants in interviews mentioned that it is difficult for local media to achieve sustainability without public funding in an oversaturated media market. Therefore, local media are often dependent on public funding, and the untransparent models of awarding funding, making this an effective tool for political pressure. In Serbia, what became clear from the interviews is that public funds are perceived as being reserved for politically connected media, or that local media receive only a small share of available funds, while most subsidies go to media controlled by the local government.

In Croatia, the situation with untransparent financing of local media depends on the region, given that the situation has changed in certain regions in Croatia after the local elections in 2021. As a local journalist from Istria explained, prior to the elections, many local media outlets were dependent on subsidies which came directly from local municipalities' budgets, which was a risk for media autonomy. After the last elections, these models changed, and the issue of public media funding has become an important topic in Istria. A similar situation was noted in Zagreb, where during the former local government rule there were available subsidies for local media in Zagreb, which were not continued with the new local government. Both participants in the interviews in Croatia agreed that this might be an opportunity for the development of models of public subsidies with safeguards for media autonomy.

The second problem detected through the interviews is the **structure and concentration of ownership on the local media market**. In Slovenia, oligarch Martin Odlazek owns almost 90% of Slovenian local media, which creates a great risk for ownership influence on media, and a threat to media pluralism. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the ownership problem is that many local media were founded by local governments and are funded to a great extent directly from the local budget (even up to 90% according to interviews). For this reason, some of the interviewees in Bosnia and Herzegovina openly stated that they were not autonomous from local governments.

The third problem which was apparent from the interviews pertains to the **vulnerability of local media to external influences and changes**, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, due to the lack of diversity in sources of funding. For example, the interviews in Slovenia revealed that many local media outlets rely on one source of revenue, which made their position vulnerable, due to a decline in sales or advertising during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, a diversity of sources of revenue is still not enough for the sustainability in saturated media markets, like in Serbia. Local media in the Serbian sample usually rely on various sources of revenue: sales, advertising, donations, EU funding and public subsidies.

In all of the countries, the problems of the local media being understaffed were mentioned in interviews. This could also be connected to the findings from the content analysis, which found a lack of original media initiative in covering news stories and a lack of sources used for news stories. In an interview with a local media journalist from Croatia, it became clear that a lack of

resources for investigative journalism and the diminishing importance of journalism make it difficult for local media outlets to provide deeper analyses of certain topics, like human rights. Although the Covid-19 pandemic was a great challenge for the sustainability of local media, layoffs of journalists were not reported in the interviews.

4.2. Support for the local community, public interest, democracy, and human rights

Most of the participants in the interviews from local media agreed on the normative role that local media should have for the local community, public interest, democracy, and human rights. However, there were several different framings of the local media contribution to public interest, democracy and human rights expressed in the interviews. For example, in some of the interviews, editors expressed the **important role local media have in democracy building** and contributing to a more democratic society. As one local media editor from Serbia explained:

“Democracy cannot be set from the outside, or from Belgrade... the role of media, NGOs and intellectuals is in that direction.”

However, as another editor from Serbia explained, reporting on human rights issues and peace building can provoke public attacks, especially when reporting on refugees or war crimes.

The role of **local media in strengthening participation and developing a closer connection with citizens** was also expressed in interviews. The local media outlet Južne vesti from Serbia even developed an application for reporting issues and stories, where citizens can provide information and report issues that they notice in their local community. A local media editor from Zagreb also shared a similar view of the role of their media outlet. Citizens often contact the local media outlet when they cannot receive information or support from the local services or government. This local media outlet and local communities on Facebook are often in a symbiotic relationship – the local media outlet highlights stories which social media users are interested in, and therefore further broadens its reach. As a local media editor from Croatia put it:

“Facebook comments create a story of their own.”

Another important view of the local media role in promoting public interest is in informing citizens and monitoring government and democratic processes, giving local media outlets a sort of **watchdog role**, which was expressed in more interviews across the four countries. As one of the local media editors from Slovenia stated:

“I think that the role of our local media is to consistently monitor local authorities, that is our main public interest.” (Local media editor from Slovenia)

Some local media outlets, especially in Slovenia, expressed their public role in **regional development, connection, and identity building**. Aside from local identity, several local media outlets also expressed the importance of **acknowledging the diversity of identities** inside a region or local community. This is especially pronounced in multicultural or multiethnic communities like in Slovenia (where there is a notable Italian minority), or in Bosnia and Herzegovina. One local media editor from Bosnia and Herzegovina explained the role of their media outlet like this:

Media in a local community, and that is also a mission of our media outlet, should be dedicated to citizens and to the life of their city, local themes, events and people. They should point to the problems in their community and the problems of their citizens, marginalized social groups, to positive examples from the community, events which

improve the lives of citizens, and they should promote a multiethnic society, education, culture and sport.

One other perception of the role of local media is **providing information for the public debate and dialogue** among citizens, in a way that is opening a space for the development of the public sphere. However, there was also some skepticism expressed over this role, as social media has become an important space where debate takes place. One local media editor from Slovenia explained:

[Social media] gave an opportunity to people to express their problems, it became a space for the exchange of opinions and attitudes (for and against) about certain issues. Before, it was magazines that were used for the exchange of opinions, but today anyone can write what they feel on Facebook. There used to be, for example, two pages of "Letters from Readers," where we left a space for people to share their attitudes and views.

Others see the potential in the role social media could have in promoting dialogue and exposing the non-transparent connections between local governments and local media. As a local journalist from Istria explained, audiences often mock and criticize, and therefore expose content shared by local media on social media which serves as a space for uncritical promotion of local government.

Some media outlets see themselves as having a traditional role of local media, offering a mixture of **information, education, and entertainment**. This is, perhaps, a role accepted in more commercially oriented media, which try to balance between offering entertainment and information. For example, this is a position of a local media outlet from Zagreb, which is commercial and audience oriented, and sees its public interest in offering "service news" and themes that audiences seek. However, some of the editors also share a concern that it is difficult to maintain this traditional role under the commercial pressures, which are at odds with media's democratic role.

However, there were also some editors who expressed skepticism towards these normative ideals. According to one of the editors in Slovenia who made some criticisms, 30 years of transition was not enough to develop a clear idea of what public interest in Slovenia is, which makes it difficult for local media to hold on to this idea under various pressures. Similar skepticism was expressed by an editor from Bosnia and Herzegovina, which revealed another position about the more collaborative role of local media in which they serve as a kind of an information board of local government and local services:

"I do not think about the ideal role of media because it does not exist. We try to be "the voice of the city", so that citizens are informed in time about all the important events in all segments, from political to social."

However, although adherence to normative democratic roles of local media is expressed in most of the media, results of the content analysis show that the content of local media does not reflect this position. As Tjaša Turnšek, a researcher from Ljubljana pointed out after analyzing results from Slovenia, there is a large discrepancy between theory and practice, what the local media perceive to be their role, and what the final output is. The reason for this discrepancy is probably in different pressures that local media outlets are exposed to, something that is further explained later in the report.

4.3. Pressures and influences on local media

In the interviews, editors explained many pressures that they face, the most important ones being economic and political pressures, which also often overlap. In Serbia, some editors claim that the clear political pressures from the past, expressed directly in the form of commands, strategic lawsuits, threats, or physical attacks, are now transformed to economic pressures.

“There were even physical attacks, Molotov cocktails were thrown at us... But this stopped happening ten years ago. Now it’s more sophisticated, through cutting off financial support and through lawsuits,” as a local media editor from Serbia pointed out.

They also said:

Earlier, we received multiple lawsuits from Velimir Ilić, who was the mayor, and then became a minister. We also received threats very often, that we will be beaten or killed. In the last couple of years, this has stopped. Now there’s only an economic pressure. Many entrepreneurs do not want to advertise at our outlet, some of them even give us donations but ask to remain anonymous, to not advertise them, because they fear inspections.

In Serbia, local media often finance themselves by applying to public tenders for local media subsidies. But these subsidies are transferred in an untransparent way and they discriminate against critical media.

“Tenders have become a means for political parties to finance regime-friendly media. They give some of the funding to us, too, just so we do not complain that we have not received anything, while being the media outlet with the highest readership here, said a local media editor from Serbia.

In Croatia, a similar mixture of political and economic pressures was discovered. Firstly, many local media outlets are directly funded through local government budgets, via non-transparent tenders. Many local media outlets receive advertising from companies owned by local municipalities and publish native articles which promote the successes of local governments or local public companies. Often, these articles are not clearly marked as promotional, but seem like an original news report. A local media journalist from Croatia stated:

“often there is a journalist’s signature in articles where journalists write native and propaganda texts advertising certain companies owned by the city, the municipality, or city projects.”

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, political pressures are seen more clearly, as many local media are established and directly funded by local governments.

We feel pressures of different kinds – from founders, politicians all the way to the directors of this media outlet. All employees are exposed to pressures, from editors to journalists. Pressures usually come from the founders of media outlets (the prime minister, ministers). They monitor whether we report or do not report on a certain event, if we play the statement longer than we should have, whether we should leave out the name of someone who is not politically in line with the current government etc. These „instructions,” or orders, are transferred to the media director who then informs the editor (of a news and information program) with the intent that the order is executed. Since I am now the editor of the news and information program, I speak from my own experience. Often there are conflicts with the media director because the orders are against professional journalism norms, but the orders should be respected, because

otherwise there will be no wages. In this kind of situation, we try to make a compromise and „sugarcoat“ certain content. The politics has a negative effect on us because many perceive us as a „regime media“, which demotivates and degrades those of us who try to do our jobs professionally. (A local media editor from Bosnia and Herzegovina)

In Slovenia, political pressures were less clearly visible than in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia, at least from what was shared in the interviews. However, some editors said that political pressures are always felt, especially prior to and during political elections. Moreover, local media editors in Slovenia recognized new political pressures stemming from citizen activist groups, which was strongly felt during the Covid-19 pandemic, as media outlets were perceived to spread “fake news” and as a means for manipulating citizens by certain conspiracy theory groups. These pressures were also expressed in an interview in Croatia, where not only was pressure from activist groups recognized, but also for regulation and fact-checking on social media. It was interesting that fact-checking and regulation of disinformation by social media was perceived as political pressure, as some decisions were perceived as unclear, and regulation as not being transparent enough.

In Slovenia, there were some positive examples among local media outlets which seemed to hold a rather high autonomy. For example, Gorenjski glas is a media outlet owned by journalists, and perceives itself as autonomous from political and other pressures, having a responsibility only to its readers. Another local media editor from Slovenia also expressed satisfaction with a higher level of autonomy:

“Being an owner, director, and editor at the same time makes it a lot easier to avoid any kind of pressures.”

Clear economic pressures were more clearly expressed among editors in Slovenia. Some editors explained they felt advertising pressures from their own marketing departments, and some felt economic pressures from owners’ economic expectations.

“There is advertising pressure from our own marketing department, and also political and economic pressures to report in a specific way. If you report ‘the wrong way’, you lose the advertising money,” a local media editor from Slovenia stated.

Other pressures expressed in interviews mostly stem from a problematic financial situation and political pressures. Many local media outlets report being understaffed, which makes it very difficult to achieve greater quality in their work. Negative influences on journalism work are also recognized in the lack of reliable sources. As an interview from Serbia revealed, official sources are often unreliable, and sometimes representatives of public institutions are not allowed to give statements to media. This was especially problematic during the Covid-19 pandemic, given that, for example, only the city mayor would be giving statements to the media, even when it came to information about health issues and epidemiology, areas in which they were surely not an expert and could not give reliable information. At the second workshop held as part of this project, one of the journalists from Bosnia and Herzegovina attributed the high percentage of anonymous sources in local media to fears that many have when giving statements to media. As they explained, independent sources critical of the government often do not feel comfortable in revealing their identity.

Local media mostly perceive the role of professional journalism associations as positive and supportive, although there were some criticisms made in this respect. According to interviews held in Bosnia and Herzegovina, media often ask for support when confronted with political pressures, and BH Journalists Association provides information and support in these cases. A

local journalist from Croatia also emphasized support journalists receive from both the Croatian Journalism Association and the Trade Union of Croatian Journalists. However, a local media editor from Croatia shared doubts that new generations of journalists are informed about the activities of professional organizations and expressed concern that these organizations were not doing enough to promote their activities and attract new members. In Serbia, professional journalism associations are divided along the pro-government and independent lines. While Independent Journalist's Association of Serbia (NUNS) is perceived as providing support for local media (the criticism is only that it needs a more coherent organization), The Journalists' Association of Serbia (UNS) is seen as tolerating political pressures and creating damage to the profession with some of its actions. Slovene Association of Journalists (SAJ) is perceived important because of the code of ethics committee and the services it provides to journalists.

5. Conclusion

The study of local media in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia was based on a research on a smaller sample, which makes it difficult to provide larger generalizations. However, results point to some interesting trends and indicators of problems with which local media are faced, but also some opportunities which could be explored.

First of all, on the positive side, this study showed that local media are really oriented towards exploring local themes and addressing local actors and communities. Although many media confronted with commercial and social media pressures use a sensationalist style in reporting, the analysis of titles of local media in this sample found that the largest share of the titles were informative, and not clickbait or sensationalist. In this respect, as was emphasized by Sabina Mihelj in the workshop organized as a part of this project, local media could serve as a remedy in a hyper polarized media environment. Another positive finding was that there was a rather high share of the public serving as a protagonist in local media news stories, which means that local media tend to give a voice to the community that they are addressing (although this is not the case in all media outlets and all of the countries).

However, the content analysis also revealed many possible challenges for local media outlets in promoting a “better society.” Although the support and acknowledgement of the local media role in promoting democracy and human rights was emphasized in the interviews, there is a clear lack of focus on issues of democracy, human rights and peace building. Only 5% of articles in the sample had such focus. However, as was expressed in the discussion in the workshop with Sabina Mihelj and Václav Štětka, a question could be posed whether demanding local media to write about issues of democracy and human rights would be having too high expectations, as the dominant role of local media is to serve the local community.

There is possibly a better way of approaching the issue of democracy, human rights, and peace building, by using different approaches to stories and representing diverse issues and protagonists. As one of the local media editors from Slovenia mentioned, in their outlet they try to write about migration through the human rights issue. Local media in the analyzed sample could face some challenges in this respect, if it is to be judged by the diversity of themes and protagonists represented. There is a rather high representation of members of elites as main protagonists, and main protagonists are usually male. More space could be given to the voices of women, politicians in opposition, unions, and cultural workers. There is also a lack of balance in themes viewed as important by local media. There is a high focus on stories on crime and accidents, especially in some of the countries. While these stories might have public interest, overemphasizing such stories brings less attention to other issues which might have a stronger public interest for the local community (e.g. underrepresented themes are religion, science, civil society, education etc.).

There are many challenges which, as revealed by the interviews, stem from the lack of resources and various pressures with which local media are faced. For example, content analysis showed that 15.6% of the articles have no sources for the story, and that 72.9% of the articles have only one source for the news story (and that they mostly rely on official sources). This can be explained by understaffed newsrooms, unreliable sources and political pressures which make many sources unavailable, which were also some of

the problems shared in the interviews. A lack of resources is probably also the reason for the lack of original media initiative in exploring different themes, and why most of the content is driven by current events.

Most of the problems highlighted by this study come from the political and economic pressures towards local media, which are often intertwined. These come in the form of non-transparent public funding which also serves as a form of political pressure, ownership pressure, either in the form of pressure coming from concentration of private ownership, or the pressure from local municipalities which own local media. It also comes from the unstable and vulnerable position of local media on saturated media markets, and reliance on certain sources of funding.

6. List of recommendations for local media

Based on the results of this study and comments from media experts (Sabina Mihelj and Václav Štětka), as well as discussions with local journalists, we can propose some recommendations for local media in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia. We would just like to emphasize that most of the problems stem from the lack of financial and other resources, and political pressures with which local media are faced. These of course require either more systemic political changes, or the development of media policies or models of public funding for local media with safeguards for media autonomy. However, some insights from the study might be helpful for journalistic practice.

- More focus on the diversity of stories and issues

This study showed that there might be a risk in underrepresenting certain issues important for the local community, while certain topics (like crime stories) are covered in a higher proportion. Therefore, local media could put more effort in representing more diverse issues which have importance for the local community.

- More focus on the diversity of identities

The study showed that there is a higher representation of certain protagonists in news stories in local media (e.g. men, or politicians in power). More space could be given to protagonists with diverse identities. For example, in the analysis, it was found that voices of women, politicians in opposition, unions, and cultural workers were underrepresented.

- Use of more sources in the story

The study found that there is a lack of diversity in sources used for the news stories in local media. This can be explained by understaffed newsrooms, unreliable sources and political pressures which make many sources unavailable. However, more emphasis could be placed on corroborating sources which could be unreliable, or on putting more contextual information and analysis when only one source is available.

- More support for original journalistic initiative in exploring local issues

The lack of resources is probably the reason for the lack of original media initiative in exploring different local issues, and why most of the content is driven by current events. However, more support should be aimed at promoting original journalistic initiative and deeper investigation of stories important for the local community.

- Potential for the use of social media or applications to connect to audiences and citizens

Some media outlets in the analysis use social media or have developed applications to connect with citizens and audiences. Although there is also a risk in reliance on social media, which is important to acknowledge (e.g. the pressure to resort to clickbait content), local media could also think of strategies to use social media or certain innovations to build trust and connect to audiences.

- Diversification of sources of funding

A problem which came up in the study pertains to the vulnerability of local media to external influences and changes, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, due to the lack of diversity in sources of funding. Although in some cases the economic sustainability of local media is difficult even with a diversity of sources of funding, those media outlets which have an opportunity could consider seeking and developing alternative sources of funding.

- Closer cooperation with professional journalism associations

It seems that most local media outlets from the study had a positive cooperation with professional journalism associations. However, professional associations might invest more into connecting with different media and attracting more journalists to become members and enjoy membership benefits in terms of professional and legal support, education, or trainings. In some of the interviews, it was clear that a part of journalists from local media outlets were not aware of the role and benefits of professional associations. Therefore, professional journalism associations should invest more in the promotion of their activities and attracting more members, especially those of younger generations.

- Closer cooperation with other local media representatives and journalists, across the region

What emerged from this project and discussions in workshops is that local media outlets in the region share many of the similar problems, and therefore might benefit from closer cooperation, networking and sharing experiences with colleagues from other local media outlets. In this kind of closer cooperation, there is also a possibility of wider pressures on media policies and legislation.

- Advocacy for transparent models of public funding of local media

The problem of untransparent public financing of local media emerged in many interviews in this study. It would be important for professional journalism associations and for local media to put this topic on the agenda and to advocate for the transparent models of funding of local media. In some countries, there is more space for such advocacy, and there is also a possibility of regional cooperation in developing sustainable models of public funding of local media with safeguards for media autonomy.

- More monitoring of the local media market

This study showed that there is a lack of monitoring of local media market. Perhaps with more cooperation between regulatory agencies, professional associations, local media and academia, more emphasis could be put on monitoring the structure of the local media market, which could make local media more accountable, identify risks for the sustainability of media and media autonomy, and provide knowledge and strategies for sustainable and autonomous local media.