



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 26 2023



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# Media and minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina: a path towards an inclusive and democratic society

## Policy Recommendations

1. State and entity governmental institutions at all levels in Bosnia and Herzegovina should provide sufficient financial support for all minority groups in the country to create and maintain their own media and media outlets.
2. Mainstream and national media in Bosnia and Herzegovina should significantly increase the production of media content related to minorities, ethnic, national, religious, cultural, and other minority groups in the country, thereby becoming open spaces for cultural cooperation, exchange, and democratic participation and thus magnifying their potential as platforms and levers of the democratisation of society.
3. Legislative reforms and changes in the domain of media law in Bosnia and Herzegovina are urgently needed in order to ensure that media is inherently plural, representative, and inclusive, as well as that it is fulfilling the demands of democracy.

## Abstract

This Policy Brief presents a broader overview of some of the most significant aspects regarding the role of media in building democracy in terms of the reinforcement and affirmation of minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, whether as a result of ethnic background, religious belief, sexual orientation, geographic location, income level, etc. Once the mentioned media's support and affirmation of minorities is accomplished, such groups can effusively participate in and

contribute to this country's institutions and society in general.

This is an attempt to revive and reconsider the issue related to minority cultural identities and communication *via* media in the context of the democratisation process in general. It is very much needed to open new discussions related to media and democracy due to the current global political crisis that is reflecting in Bosnia and Herzegovina's media sphere as well.



# Media and minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina: a path towards an inclusive and democratic society

## Introduction

Democracy, in its unpretentious and simple conception, is a form of government in which it is recognised that ultimate authority belongs to the people and that the people have the right to participate in the decision-making processes and to appoint and dismiss those in governing authority. For Robert Dahl (1989), its main characteristic is the continuous responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, who are considered political equals. Democratisation is the process of transitioning from an undemocratic to a more democratic system. Therefore, both democracy and democratisation have not only political but also cultural, social, and economic meanings and results. This is especially related to the media, which are identified as the litmus paper of democracy by virtue of the way in which they treat and represent minorities and minority groups.

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According to Thomas A. Bauer (2007), in the context of a democratic media society, society is what its communication is like. Any society organising its status and its development is structurally dependent on its interaction and communication system, on its communication quality from the perspective of culture, and on its orders of social practice from a general perspective. In other words, media are social institutions and institutions of social practice, organised in such a way as to provide public communication of society with itself and with others *via* contents that are important for the entire community, as well as to provide political and cultural belonging for minority groups. On the other side, media representations of minorities and the way they are delivered in our society in the news, media, and social media can unfavourably affect the way various minorities perceive themselves and the way others recognise and identify them. In spite of these challenges, sustained and unjust disadvantages are known to empower joint action efforts within minority groups and solidarity efforts within advantaged groups to correct the image and position of underprivileged groups in society. This could be a path towards a more genuinely open and democratic society. But where is Bosnia and Herzegovina in that context?

In that regard, it is important to underline that media represent an important and irreplaceable factor in every contemporary society by constantly collecting, analysing, and disseminating information, values, attitudes, ideologies, tastes, and thoughts. The media do not represent the mere transmitters of information; they also select and shape that information, so it can be argued that social reality is, for the most part, a reality created and shaped by the media. In this way, the media mostly affects the perception of reality of almost every individual, but also the interpretation of reality as such.



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## **Some of the foremost features of the media and the minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

The existence and functioning of a completely equal and two-way fluctuation of information in society have not been achieved anywhere, but it can be said that societies that are considered truly democratic and whose foundations are based on the rule of law are approaching that goal. Many media theorists as well as sociologists believe that a particular society is closer to democracy insofar as the role of the media is more important and more purposeful because the media makes it possible to represent numerous and diverse social and cultural groups, their interests, and their values. These guidelines make every society an open society. On the contrary, one of the problems that has not yet been sufficiently demystified is the mechanism of closing society by the media, which particularly applies to countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. The old and rigid but at the same time different ideological matrices tinted in many cases with subtle animosities or the direct and brutal hate speech still are and remain very frequent and influential, and they are being repeatedly recreated in the media sphere. The collectivist-ethnocentric version of media production in Bosnia and Herzegovina required, still requires, and realises interventions regarding the form and way of shaping media content today. Related to this, the primary role of all these spheres is not to create unsustainable constructs or to dream of ideal societies, but to identify the social, political, and economic problems that a particular society faces, as well as to look for effective, applicable, and progressive solutions for them.

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One of the best examples when it comes to media and their role in the community is certainly the question of the importance of media for minorities and their cultural identities specifically. It is a long-known thesis that the democracy of one society reflects in its relationship towards minority groups. What is a minority group? According to Wirth, it is a group of people who, because of their cultural or physical characteristics, are singled out from others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination (Wirth, 2013: 347).

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Correspondingly, one of the main elements of strengthening democracy in a multi-ethnic community is precisely strengthening the visibility of minorities in that community, not only national minorities but also minorities related to various subcultures and countercultures and different types of vulnerable groups existing in one



community. Unlike the societies of Western Europe and especially American society, in which the relationship towards minorities is primarily economically and only then politically and culturally determined, in the societies of the former Yugoslavia, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, the ethnically motivated divisions between the majority and the minorities, which are still being politically instrumentalised and recycled, remain current.

The media represent the largest portion of the wider information and communication system, within which the minority media operate as well. In this concrete case, the role of the state and the public state services whose policy towards minorities and their operationalisation within the media policy determines to a large extent whether minority media or media content related to the life and culture of minorities will be encouraged, relativised, ignored, or even prevented is of decisive importance.

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First of all, it is important to accentuate the difference between the presence of minorities in the media and the media of the minorities themselves. The first aspect regards the presence of minorities and their social (in)visibility in the so-called majority media, while the other aspect relates to the media of the minorities themselves, the media that are in service of communication within the minority community (Stojković, 2002). The demarcation zone between these two divisions of the media has never been strictly defined, so in a certain number of cases, we can speak of minority redactions within the majority media. According to the respectable communication expert Branimir Stojković, these redactions are very important, even if they were only ideal-typical (2002:170). In this way, the acceptance, understanding, and emphasis of the very important role of media in building and strengthening the pluralism of cultural identities of the community, meaning democracy, directing their cultural, social, and political activism, and defining their relationship towards the majority and other minority groups are built. On a basic level, they help citizens, especially young people, become familiar with the existence of different cultural identities, which largely confirms the educational character of the media. This aspect is extremely important and imperative for Bosnian and Herzegovinian society.

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When it comes to types of media in the context of strengthening the cultural identity of national minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>1</sup>, for example, the press represents a type of media that is exclusively a medium of activist action by individuals from minority groups and not minorities themselves. Due to financial and other issues, we have witnessed numerous failed attempts at starting newspapers and magazines. However, radio, especially local radio, can still represent one of the more

1 Bosnia and Herzegovina recognises three constituent peoples and 17 national minorities: Albanians, Montenegrins, Czechs, Italians, Jews, Hungarians, Macedonians, Germans, Poles, Roma, Romanians, Russians, Ruthenians, Slovaks, Slovenians, Turks, and Ukrainians. The biggest community is the Roma people in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



important media for minorities. Its launch is relatively financially available, but it is also possible to rent the time slot of an already existing radio station. Television is the medium that makes minorities visible in the most efficient way, but it is also the most expensive medium. Additionally, as stated earlier, television is the most controlled by political structures. But the medium that is used the most in this particular context is the Internet. The Internet enables minorities, regardless of their territorial and other affiliations, to represent themselves in the most adequate way and to communicate with each other in a virtual space that does not belong to any state (Stojković, 2002). In this way, the divisions between the minority and the majority can disappear by establishing a horizontal network of cultural identities in the virtual space, which belongs to everyone and also no one.

***But the medium that is used the most in this particular context is the Internet.***

In this context, the media could play a more significant role in the development and meeting of all cultures on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina and beyond than they did before. Firstly, the media are omnipresent, and they should, to a greater extent than so far, find a real developmental dialectic with regards to encouraging and strengthening the convergence of different cultural identities and the mutual adoption of different values. Together, the media should find authentic references for understanding the Bosnian and Herzegovinian cultural space and express it as such.

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The programmes of intercultural cooperation that are primarily related to specific branches of culture are not enough; they are mostly supported and initiated by the European Council, for example. Open cooperation of people and in the media, the movement of people in different environments, and the gathering of creators from different cultural centres, i.e., a real contribution to the demetropolitanisation of culture, overcoming national cultural autarchism, and the creation of quality media content in the field of culture in the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina, are necessary. When it comes to minorities, there are no complex, compound, educational, or meaningful programmes in the field of cultural cooperation. Many cultural associations suffer from "national concern", so they "do not have time" to create and implement programmes of cooperation with the cultural associations of others. If such programmes exist, they are little or not at all visible in the media. Acceptance of ethnic and cultural groups that seem bizarre, if not outlandish, and unimportant to the majority can represent one of the greatest challenges that any democratic society can face. But democracies recognise that diversity can be an enormous advantage and strength, which is precisely a foremost European value.

## Conclusion

Why this Policy Brief? Simply because democracy, the media aspect included, in Bosnia and Herzegovina is seriously threatened today. Some media, whether they want it or not, still produce national divisions, awaken the old ones, unkindly remind of them, and contribute to the creation of new ones, and that is because they are for many reasons powerless, having the position of being ruled, to be in service of overcoming



those divisions. From there, we find a lot of misinformation in the system of informing, a lot of misinformation, and a lot of the misinformed. The problem is maybe not even in journalism itself as a profession, but it is rather a much more complicated and intensifying problem now, particularly in the context of the legal amendments that were adopted by the RS entity parliament in the summer of this year. According to the law, making malicious or untrue statements about a person will be called defamation, with various prescribed penalties. Larger penalties are set in situations where defamation is presented in the media, including social networks or at a public meeting. The new legislation reintroduced the criminalisation of defamation, despite the solemn objections of journalists, other media professionals, and members of the international community, who cautioned that these law changes are a serious attack on freedom of expression and human rights and a step towards censorship in this part of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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Bosnia and Herzegovina, as it is today, does not have a need for synthetic, connecting information that would influence mutual acquaintance, understanding, and common participation in all its innumerable cultural identities. The new social strata prefer non-author sensationalist journalism, the kind that deals with “scandals” and not the actual life process, the production of life, real-life events, problems, aspirations, and needs of every member of society. That is why it is ‘normal’, especially among certain parts of the country, that there is no sufficient complete and serious informing activity and such media content because there is no objective political reasoning either. Cultures, no matter how contrary that may be from the other side of their habitus, are in that way being suffocated in the closed ethnic spaces; they do not even become open national cultures but enclosed ethno parks. Contrary to this, at the level of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian space, it is necessary to ensure and, through the media, secure the multidimensionality of the meeting of cultures and cultural identities. First, there should be an all-around exchange of cultural legacy and science and art, of that which is most valuable and affirming, in such a way that it expresses the valuing of values of all cultures and cultural identities. Additionally, state and entity governmental institutions at all levels in Bosnia and Herzegovina should provide sufficient financial support for all minority groups in the country to create and maintain their own media and media outlets. It is also vital for mainstream and national media in Bosnia and Herzegovina to significantly increase the production of media content related to minorities, ethnic, national, religious, cultural, and other minority groups in the country, thereby creating open spaces for cultural cooperation, exchange, and democratic participation and thus magnifying their potential as platforms and levers of the democratisation of society. The old but never-overcome issue of legislative reforms and changes in the domain of media law in Bosnia and Herzegovina are still needed in order to ensure that media is inherently plural, representative, and inclusive, as well as that it is fulfilling the demands of democracy and authentic democratic principles.

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The media in Bosnia and Herzegovina in general, whether new media, advertising, television, print news, or any other medium, can be said to reflect our society. Throughout the various crises of democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina's society, diversity, equity, and inclusion have become increasingly needed, especially *via* the media, in order to increase more serious awareness of issues such as inequities, including minorities' discrimination, equal rights for minority groups, protecting equal legislation, etc.

This, along with a long history of societal ideals and challenges of democracy, would hopefully result in a diverse media representation of minorities. In fact, the media has underrepresented minority communities for a very long time. It includes gender, class, race and ethnicity, religion, and other minority groups.

On the other side, an anthropological and sociological constant is that there is not and cannot be a hierarchy between cultures. The richness of different cultural identities represents an immanent value of the entire society's democratisation, but in order to strengthen, ennoble, and enrich this value, it is crucial for the media to understand the essence of the process of culture, its inner need for accepting the Other and the Different as a substance of European integration, if they do not want to be among those who close this exhausted and shattered society but gain the determination and drive to open themselves to adopting and respecting the values of others and the values of spot-on democracy.

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