

The challenges to audiovisual and media cooperation between EU and Western Balkan candidate countries'

By Laia Comerma

In 2018, the European Commission put the Western Balkans back in the policy agenda by designating them as a political challenge with its new Western Balkans Strategy (European Commission, 2018), because of the increased presence of external powers like China or Russia. This is concerning to the European Union because, on the one side, Von der Leyen's 'geopolitical Commission' has made a commitment to the region to speed up the Enlargement process as a remedy for the widespread 'Enlargement fatigue' in Western Balkan countries among their societies and political elites, and on the other hand, because the presence of foreign powers that align to a different set of values and rules can have pervasive effects of the regulatory environment and national security in these countries, delaying the acquisition of the *acquis communautaire* as the main requirement for their entry as EU Member States.

In this context, the audiovisual and media industry has a key role to play. First, because the democratically maturing political system of these countries, which have often been defined as 'stabilocracies' (Bieber, 2020), use the media as a controlling tool to "regularly produce artificial political crises over EU conditionalities to undermine any true efforts in strengthening the rule of law" (Hoxaj, 2021: 165). Second, because the media and audiovisual industry, and the narrative spread through it have a key role as a mechanism to spread social rules and socialise the population in Western Balkan countries into the EU values defined in Art. 2 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), which is again a necessary requirement for their accession into the European Union, and to promote the support for it among their population. Having realised this, foreign powers use direct and indirect cooperation with media outlets in these countries (European Parliament, 2022), some of which are directly owned by foreign entities, to promote their narratives, and standards on media freedom and human rights, which differ from those of the European Union (Vladisavljev, 2021).

The EU itself has recognised this problem, admitting that "there is also extensive political interference in and control of the media" in Western Balkan countries (European Commission, 2018). Thus, it "needs to safeguard the freedom of expression and independence of media as a pillar of democracy" (ibid.). Consequently, the EU has various projects to enhance this cultural cooperation. Among them, the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II) funds activities aimed at strengthening cross-border cultural cooperation with and competitiveness of cultural and creative industries in the Western Balkans ([EAEA/39/2019](#)). Out of 350 entries, the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) chose 13 projects with 91 partners.

Moreover, the EU takes a broader, whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, to promote media freedom, access to information, and media literacy in order to counter disinformation and build societal resilience in Western Balkan countries. It does so by funding research studies, capacity-building projects, workshops for students and teachers, and social media campaigns. It also acts in partnership with the civil society and supports the work of international, regional and local civil society organisations that act as fact-checkers, such as the Tijana Cvjetićanin of BiH organisation Raskrinkavanje (EEAS, 2022).

Last but not least, looking at the audiovisual sector more broadly, it is a perfect illustration of the reality that the European Union will need to promote internal reform in order to enhance its policy efficiency post-Enlargement, as Enlargement augments the characteristics of European audiovisual market by adding to Europe “more diversity, more languages, and more (audiovisual) cultures” (de Smaele, 2007). This increases its cultural diversity but present challenges to the competitiveness of the European audiovisual industry, as the REBOOT project recognises and studies in depth (Psychogiopoulou *et al.*, 2024). As part of accession negotiations, however, the EU has promoted legislative alignment with the EU *acquis* by requiring Western Balkan countries to adopt its Television without Frontiers Directive (Council of the EU, 1989), and several other media laws, and they were granted participation in MEDIA and Creative Europe programmes through their Association Agreements with the EU.

Nonetheless, if the European Union wants to realise the full potential of audiovisual cooperation with Western Balkan countries and tap on the increased circulation and market potential, promote a European identity, culture and values, and its audiovisual and media standards, it will need to address and resolve the perceived conflict between preserving their national culture and national identity in such ethnically fragmented societies as the Western Balkans, which has contributed to high levels of “Euroscepticism”. The audiovisual and media sectors are key to Western Balkan enlargement, but they are also the perfect illustration of the inherent conflicts in EU audiovisual policy, and built-in tensions between the protection of its cultural diversity and European integration, and between competitiveness and cultural diversity itself. Its ability to resolve these tensions will impact not only its Western Balkan policy, but the future of EU audiovisual policy more broadly.

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