

Cultural Identity and Role of the Albanian Public Broadcasters

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Abstract

Development of national cultural identity, is depended on several factors. One of that key especially, in terms of public broadcaster's role in society is considered media policies. Albanian Public Broadcaster, is a major player in constructing and strengthening of the national cultural identity. Its role and purpose is very well defined in the Audiovisual Media Law. The last decades was associated with the emerge and competition of private television stations, whereas the functions of the Albanian Public Broadcaster has not only been strengthened but in contrary, it has been weaken. This paper will be focused on national cultural identity, as one of the key principles of the Albanian Public Broadcaster. On how it has been supported as it is legitimized in the Audiovisual Media Law and perceived by the public of the country. It comes to conclusion that the State by exercising of their economic and political power and control over the Albanian Public Broadcaster, has damaged and prevented the fulfillment of this principle. State-RTSH, remain de facto, close links of a chain, which still hold pending public interests.

Key words: *National Cultural Identity; Public Service Broadcaster; Media Policies; Audiovisual Media Law;*

Introduction

Building of the national cultural identity in the public is related to many factors, where factor such as media policies plays a crucial role. It particularly puts emphases on the importance of public broadcaster in society. Albanian Public Broadcaster must be a major player in the construction and strengthening of the national cultural identity. Albanian Audiovisual Broadcasting Law defines national identity as

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one of the main principle that is reflected on the goals that the public broadcaster must fulfill, as well. The emerging of commercial television stations the last decades has challenged Albanian Public Broadcaster, where this principle has not only been strengthened but seems to be weakened.

On the one hand the lack of political will to reform Albanian Television into a Public Broadcaster on the other hand the private broadcasters competition and the pressure of the clientele political in favor of commercial interests, has led to a lack of accountability of the Albanian Public Broadcaster to the public.

The purpose of the study is to identify how national cultural identity takes place in the Albanian public broadcaster, as one of the principles of Public Service Broadcasters and how that is perceived by the public.

Research questions posed in this study are:

How the principle of national cultural identity gets sanctioned in the Albanian Audiovisual Media Law, as one of the key principle of the Public Broadcaster?

How it gets reflected on through the programs of the Public Television?

Is it still a relevant principle for the public broadcasters as it has been meant to be?

Firstly, let see the definition of the Public Service Broadcasting on perspective of the national identity. We will try to understand, how relevant is the principle of national identity today. Is it still worth pushing or having a sense of national identity through the public service broadcaster.

The concept of public service broadcasting was developed for the first time in early of 1920.

“Thus the definition of broadcasting as a public utility, and the mandate to develop it as a national service in the public interest, came from the state. The interpretation of that definition, the effort to realize its meaning in the development of a broadcasting service guided by considerations of a national service and the public interest, came from the broadcasters and above all from John Reith, the managing director of the British Broadcasting Company from 1923 to

1926, and the first Director-General of the British Broadcasting Corporation from 1927 to 1938".¹ There are a number of views for the Public Service Broadcaster in the Reithian vision. Public Broadcaster should be used as an enlightenment instrument. This should be achieved through "entertainment, information and education".² Transmissions should keep the attention to three truths: impartiality, objectivity and balance. One of the central roles of Public Service Broadcasting that should be accomplished, according to Reith, is promotion and developing of a sense of national identity. McQuail formulates Public Service Broadcasting model as a system that should serve to the public interest, and meet the important needs of society and its citizens for communication, in accordance with the democratic political system.

Main goals of Public Service Broadcaster are listed: "Universality of geographic coverage; Diversity in providing for all tastes, interests and needs as well as matching the full range of opinions and beliefs; Providing for special minorities; Having concern for the national culture, language and identity, Serving the needs of the political system; Providing balanced and impartial information on issues of conflict; Having a specific concern for "quality", as defined in different ways; Putting public interest before financial objectives".³ McQuail emphasises that an effective system for serving the public interest has to meet certain structural conditions. In particular it should have "a founding charter or mission; public financing to some degree; independence from government; mechanisms of accountability to the society and general public; mechanisms of accountability to the audience".⁴

¹ Paddy Scannell, *Public Service Broadcasting: The History Of A Concept*, Edited by Andrew Goodwin and

Garry Whannel, *Understanding Television*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, (2005), 11.

² Paddy Scannell, *Public Service Broadcasting: The History Of A Concept*, 13-14.

³ Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*; London: Sage Publication, 2005, (5th edition), 179-180.

⁴ Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*; London: Sage Publication, 2005, (5th edition), 181

According to McQuail, "by establishing accountability mechanisms for society and the general public, there are tensions that weaken the theory of public broadcasters.

The intense competition in globalized markets and the increasing reliance on the market to provide for all public service have weakened the position of the public broadcaster in terms of the political support in the face of predatory enemies, and reduce its capacity to compete on equal terms".⁵

But the public broadcaster, has been also recognized, as one of the few protectors, as a guarantor of diversity in the media and also as an instrument of cultural policy, where the media market has failed.

National Identity and Its Meaning

We understand with national identity, a sense of a nation in its entirety, which is represented by distinctive traditions, culture and language.⁶ In a series of documents on public broadcasting service, UNESCO has defined the principles on which a public broadcaster is built. On the question of what programs are expected to be transmitted by a public broadcaster, among others is listed national identity. Public broadcasting must do things differently. It must see its goals related closely to its mission: It should always provide the opportunities for citizens, to be informed on a variety of subjects and gain new knowledge, through interesting and attractive programs.⁷

Depending on the country, they are particular missions entrusted to the public broadcasting. One goal, is to strengthen national identity. This must be done carefully, by avoiding a polemical role of a public broadcaster that would undermine his credibility. UNESCO's document notes that: "Strengthening civic sense of belonging, yes - it is needed to be strengthened. While the propagation of a particular

⁵ Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*; 181

⁶ Oxford Dictionary, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/national-identity>

⁷ Dave Atkinson, Marc Raboy, *Public Service Broadcasting*, UNESCO, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001097/109746Eb.pdf>

excessive concept about the identity, not".⁸ While noting: the independence of public broadcaster should be guaranteed always". The public broadcaster, more than any other broadcaster programming, must be national in its content. This does not mean the exclusion of foreign products. However, according to their role as a public forum, "Public broadcasters must first promote the expression of ideas, thoughts and the current values in the society in which they operate".⁹ This is the perspective how the document sees the contents that should take place in a program of the public broadcaster. With this in mind, what is considered critical to a public broadcaster, is to give the priority to the national programs. In some countries exist a tendency, to pay more attention to the origin of the programs rather than to their content. We must defend ourselves against the identification of the program quality with the national content, since they are not always synonymous. The international program market of the broadcasting is much more developed. In certain genres, such as fiction, it is quiet cheaper to buy foreign programs than to produce a program in house. However, the public broadcaster should ask themselves whether these international dramas are essential for the programming they want to offer. Are they in the accordance with the mission of a public broadcaster or they may be considered complementary?

National Identity in the Public Broadcaster

According to Monroe Price national identity is seen from the instrumental, the essential and pluralistic view. " The very fact that there can be such disparate models of national identity (the instrumental, the essential, and the pluralistic) helps demonstrate why one of the most difficult questions in both the mature Western democracies and transitional post-Communist societies is

determining the proper government role in structuring and regulating the broadcast media. For those who hold to the essentialist

⁸ Dave Atkinson, Marc Raboy, *Public Service Broadcasting*, UNESCO, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001097/109746Eb.pdf>

⁹ Atkinson & Raboy, *Public Service Broadcasting*, UNESCO

view, a strong government interest in television (as a molder of attitudes and opinion) is vital. If there are to be enduring, deeply felt bonds that bring a nation and a state together, then the ornaments of national identity must be nourished, exhibited and respected. For those who hold to a pluralist definition of national identity, it is immensely important to attend to the administration of any mechanism that can overwhelm or shatter delicate multi-cultural balances".¹⁰

"It is the instrumental definition which is most troublesome yet most alluring. National identity can easily become a camouflage for a series of controls that occupy the creative space and deny the opportunity for a pluralism of views and freedom of expression".¹¹ The pluralist view is an important meaning for national identity protection, a meaning found in statute through Europe and in the new transition societies, according to Price where "a state-protected pluralism evolves, one in which various ethnic and religious groups are protected, often through explicit legal requirement".¹² Media concentration and ownership is becoming an issue to pluralism.

Public service broadcasters, in recognition of the special relationship that exists in terms of national identity, may oppose the media imperialism that is easily facilitated by the commercial media. It refers to the imported programs that commercial media tend to buy because of its low cost, that determine in-house productions that should be distinct and resonating the culture of the country. This can be settled by offering content produced in-house, and by following the direction care for all interests and tastes. Settling the guideline that stimulates creativity of the producers, the broadcaster allows the creator staff of the programs to explore freely the society in which they operate, by reminding in a critical way to the audience, the nature of identity and their culture.

The society itself becomes more heterogeneous in a globalized world. The commercial media is there to ensure the individual

¹⁰ Monroe E. Price, *Television, The Public Sphere and National Identity*, Oxford University Press, (1996), 40.

¹¹ Monroe E. Price, *Television, The Public Sphere and National Identity*, 41.

¹² Monroe E. Price, *Television, The Public Sphere and National Identity*, 40.

consumption. However, while this process will take to occupy market segments care for its lucrative purposes, it will not necessarily provide a broader understanding of a pluralistic society. While Monroe Price, notes that "globalism may be welcome to authoritarian governments precisely because it erodes the domestic public sphere, traditionally, one of the first objectives of those who seek to consolidate power is to eliminate a competitive political press. But a global broadcasting system that is neutral, even apolitical, is a highly acceptable substitute. Polished global services, delivered by satellite, dilute any competitive political voice at home as much as they weaken the controlled voice of the state itself ".¹³

Albanian Public Broadcaster and National Cultural Identity in the Audiovisual Media Law

In early 2013, the Albanian Parliament managed to pass the Audiovisual Media Law. After decades of efforts, it was the pressure of the international institutions that forced the politicians to bring a law that in its appearances looks in compliance with the directives of Audiovisual Media Service of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union.

But at its core does not conveys the will for a law that would allow emancipation of the broadcasting media in the country. It is not only becomes a guarantor of a quality public service broadcasting, but rather through a chain of paradoxes (such as articles on choosing Direction Council members of RTSH and member of AMA) they hold hostage the only Audiovisual Public Broadcaster. Albanian Public Broadcaster, is treated de facto as a political instrument by the politicians, right they get into the power.

Article 91 of Audiovisual Media Law, defines the statement of purpose of the Albanian Public Broadcaster: "Dedicated to the highest ideals of national public service broadcasting, RTSH will provide a

¹³ Monroe E. Price, *Television, The Public Sphere and National Identity*, Oxford University Press, (1996), 38.

quality service quality to inform, educate and entertain the public, serving to the nation, and all groups of society including even the national minorities".¹⁴ Some of main goals of the RTSH's activity are: "...to ensure that its programs reflects the different elements of human and cultural and to pay a particular attention to the distinctive elements of the culture and Albanian language; ...c) to take into account the need for public information and understanding on his part of the values and traditions of other countries, particularly European ones; c) to provide a full range of programs in Albanian language, which reflect cultural diversity, entertain, inform and educate the public, provide coverage of sports, religious, cultural and meet the expectations of the public in general, as well as individuals that belong to social minorities, while respecting human dignity in every case; ... d) establish and maintain the orchestra of RTSH/ or the similar groups; to invest in the film productions, ...".¹⁵ In Article 119 of audiovisual programs of RTSH, it is provided the inclusion of several channels that will provide programs free of charge. Well at a first glance it seems to have a harmonized law with EU directives. But on the other hand we did not find any official document of RTSH, that shows how this law will be implemented in practice and what are the structures that will ensure that RTSH will serves to public interest. (Handle on previous studies about the Albanian Public Broadcaster). So we do not find any document that will develop, promote and guarantee the implementation of the important principle of strengthening the national identity. Therefore everything is left to the staff of RTSH, which operates without a statute and professional guidance, without goals and objectives that aims to respect and make a functional law. As a result the programs are far away by offering of qualities that a public service broadcaster should offer.

¹⁴ Ligji nr. 97/2013 Për Mediat Audiovizive Në Republikën e Shqipërisë
http://www.inovacioni.gov.al/files/pages_files/183909149-LIGJI-Nr-97-2013-PER-MEDIAT-AUDIOVIZIVE-NE-REPUBLIKEN-E-SHQIPERISE1.pdf

¹⁵ Ligji nr. 97/2013 Për Mediat Audiovizive Në Republikën e Shqipërisë
http://www.inovacioni.gov.al/files/pages_files/183909149-LIGJI-Nr-97-2013-PER-MEDIAT-AUDIOVIZIVE-NE-REPUBLIKEN-E-SHQIPERISE1.pdf

Empirical Observation

The empirical observation in the field aimed to understand more about the perception of the journalists working at Albanian Public Broadcaster as well as the wide public, related to the goals that a Public Broadcaster should fulfill in principles (focused on national cultural identity), and how they get fulfilled in reality. We conducted two surveys: one with the journalists of TVSH and another with people from the main areas of the country. The quantitative data are processed on SPSS 15.

Questions on the component such as: a sense of identity of the journalists and the possibilities to develop the specialty, should be evaluated with scores from 1 to 10, (where 1 means not very important and 10 very important). The average scores evaluated by the journalists with 5 to 6. But the fact that other components such as, a guidance on the rights and obligations of the journalists, autonomy level and media editorial politics, are evaluated less than 5 score, make us think of the low awareness of the journalists related to the responsibilities and obligations of Public Broadcaster.

Comparing the data of total hours produced and broadcasted by TVSH during the last 8 years, we concluded that TVSH has done steps forward in increasing broadcasted hours with productions produced in house. But unfortunately the content origin doesn't resonate in the quality, especially the principle of national culture identity that should be reflected by the Albanian Public Broadcast.

Article 116 of the Audiovisual Media Law, related to the financing budget for the Public Broadcaster, foresees financial support for the programs that would service to the Albanian expats; film productions; symphonic orchestra events; etc. But the budget located for this purpose from the government to the Albanian Public Broadcaster, has been decreased to the voices related to the national and culture identity, foreseen from the Audiovisual Media Law.

Survey shows that people interviewed in the four main areas of Albania about the importance of the national culture themes covered

by a Public Broadcaster, has evaluated this principle of the Public Broadcaster as important by giving 8 score or more.

But when it comes to the question such as, how Albanian Public Broadcaster does fulfill these principles related to the culture, national identity, channels for plurality, or other components that reflect diversity the interviewer perception is low under 5 score.

Conclusions

Public Service Broadcaster has a strong relationship with the sense of national cultural identity. Media policy should take care not only to get consensus about a western legislation but also to build a functional system for Albanian Public Broadcaster, with effective structures that guarantee the programs that would serve to the public interest, specifically which convey a sense of national cultural identity.

TVSH should be concern on pluralism and diversity that gives to us not just quantity of channels or programs, but first the quality, where the distinctiveness of programs should be a key feature.

Decrease of the financing budget for RTSH, by the authoritarian governing of the political power has affected the programs that develop diversity and serve to fulfill the goal of national culture identity from the Albanian Public Broadcaster. Albanian public perceives as important the component of the culture and national identity in the principles and goals to be met by the Public Broadcaster, but it remains very critical on how these principles are reflected through the programs broadcasted from TVSH.

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