

# Bosnia and Herzegovina: Profile of Media Ownership and Potential Foreign Influence Channels

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# Introduction

What are the entry points for foreign actors to shape and influence the narrative in the Bosnian media market? This profile seeks to address some of the entry points related to media ownership and Russian state-owned media. AidData recognizes that malign influence may affect narrative creation in other ways, including the republishing of foreign content in domestic media outlets, interactions on social media, and through journalist biases. However, this project focuses solely on direct and indirect ownership of traditional domestic media outlets to identify potential entry points for Russian influence through elites and media owners. By better understanding Bosnia and Herzegovina's (hereafter Bosnia) domestic media ownership environment, including what media outlets citizens consume and who the owners of those outlets are, we can anticipate entry points where malign actors may try to influence domestic narratives.

Segmented along ethnic and political lines, the media market in Bosnia is quite complex, even compared to other countries in the region. It is also highly opaque: less than half of the top media outlets appeared in public business registries, and many outlets have gone through ownership changes in recent years with little public information released. Since owners of top media houses have the potential to influence the content and tone of topics covered by journalists in their employ, understanding who owns the media is crucial to identifying avenues for influence and potential bias in reporting. In this profile, we begin to close this gap with an in-depth look at domestic media ownership in Bosnia.

This media ownership profile and the supporting data were prepared by AidData, a research lab at William & Mary's Global Research Institute.<sup>1</sup> The data for this profile was collected manually by AidData staff and student research assistants. We began by conducting web searches to identify a list of media in Bosnia, and then identified a list of the top-ranked outlets in terms of overall consumption. We then used this information to gather the ownership data. We used cross-country sources when

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available (e.g., Zenith, Alexa<sup>2</sup>), as well as Bosnian business registries (Pravosudje.ba), business profiles, survey data, media watchdog sources, and other open source data.

In the following sections, we provide summary data on the presence of Russian state-owned media, top outlets, and media ownership in Bosnia as of 2021 (or the most contemporary data available). This profile focuses on the ownership of traditional broadcast, print, and online media outlets. Social media is not included in this analysis. By mapping out the ownership and influence of traditional forms of media, these profiles lend insights into potential channels for foreign influence in the top consumed outlets.

## Russian Media Footprints

The most direct form of Kremlin influence in Bosnia's media landscape is via Russian state-owned media (see Table 1). Six of the eleven Russian state-owned media outlets we tracked have a physical presence in Bosnia, which provides the Kremlin with a channel to directly communicate with, and ultimately influence, Bosnian citizens. Physical presence includes physical infrastructure, such as cable packages, physical office space or local bureaus, and radio broadcasters, but excludes satellite broadcasting and online or streaming availability. Table 1 provides a footprint of Russian state-owned media presence in Bosnia, but does not speak to how well-consumed each outlet is by Bosnia citizens.

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<sup>2</sup> Alexa is an online analysis tool. AidData Staff used Alexa's API to gauge website traffic. <https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo>.

Table 1: Russian state-owned media in Bosnia, 2021

Television		Print		Radio		News Agency	
Russia I	✓	Rossiyskaya Gazeta	✓	Sputnik	✗	TASS	✗
Russia 24	✓					Sputnik	✗
Russia K	✗						
RTR-Planeta	✓						
TV Centre	✓						
Channel One	✓						
RT	✓						

Other indirect forms of Russian influence are possible, including domestic outlets republishing narratives and pro-Russian journalists in-country. In this profile, AidData has captured direct Russian channels of influence through state-owned media infrastructure.

## Top Media Outlets

Table 2 identifies the top five most-consumed media outlets in Bosnia by medium (television, print, radio, and online) based on cross-sectional indicators such as viewership share and circulation. Television is the most popular medium in Bosnia.<sup>3</sup> While we cannot know the exact influence of each individual outlet, we can assume that outlets that reach higher numbers of consumers have greater potential to influence more citizens. Notably, none of the Russian state-owned outlets (previously identified in Table 1) were among those with the highest market share.

AidData used a weighted average of media consumption survey rankings from 2017 to present to determine the top media outlets in Bosnia. This strategy offers a more long-term perspective of top media outlets, rather than a snapshot of the top media

<sup>3</sup> "Bosnia-Herzegovina profile - Media," BBC News, 11 February 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17211939>.

outlets right now. As such, the top outlets may not exactly reflect the current order of most consumed outlets, but do show a solid picture of the media landscape over the past five years. Recent rankings are weighted more heavily to adjust for new changes.<sup>4</sup>

Table 2: Top Bosnian media outlets ranked by overall consumption

Rank	Television	Print	Radio	Online
1	FTV	Dnevni Avaz	Federalni	Avaz.ba
2	BHT	Oslobodjenje	Radio Republike	Klix.ba
3	Nova BH	Euroblic	BH Radio	Hercegovina.info
4	OBN	Nevazisne novisne	BN Radio	Nezavisne.com
5	BN TV	Glas Srpske	RSG Radio	Rtvbn.com

According to findings from an AidData survey of regional and local media experts in 2021, the majority of top Bosnian outlets mirror the results of open-source data collection by AidData researchers. However, additional outlets excluded from this top outlet list but ranked highly by local experts include the television stations RTRS, Federalna TV, and Al Jazeera Balkans, along with online outlets Buka.com, Balkans.aljazeera.net, and Blic.rs

## Media Ownership

Table 3 lists the ownership information of top Bosnian media outlets by medium (television, newspaper, radio, and online). Bosnian media ownership is not well

<sup>4</sup> Television, Print and Radio: Television, radio and print rankings were calculated using multiple publicly available surveys and circulation data, including an AidData survey of country and regional experts conducted in summer 2021. Additional survey data came from: Zenith (2018), IREX’s Media Sustainability Index (2019), the International Republican Institute’s Public Opinion Survey (2018), Prism Research’s “Eurobarometer Public Opinion in Bosnia and Herzegovina” (2010), the International Programme for the Development of Communication’s “Assessment of Media Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina” report (2016), and Radio-televizija Federacije Bosne i Hercegovine (2018). Online: Alexa (April 2021) and NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence’s “Russia’s Footprint in the Western Balkan Information Environment” reports (2021)

documented and few regulations exist regarding media outlets. Further examples of ownership ties and relationships are discussed in the following section.

In order to highlight which outlets may be more susceptible to Russian influence, AidData staff have devised a four-point scale to indicate levels of Russian ownership. This scale is color-coded shades of red in the table below to indicate 1) Direct Russian ownership, 2) Known Russian ties, 3) Suspected Russian ties, and 4) No Russian ties. Additionally, Bosnian state-owned media is color-coded blue. In Bosnia, no owners had suspected or known ties to the Russian government, and no outlets had direct Russian ownership. As such, this profile has no red color-coding and five designations of state-owned media.

Table 3: Ownership of top Bosnian media outlets by share

No Russian ties
  Suspected Russian ties
  Known Russian ties
  Direct Russian ownership
  Local state-owned media

Medium	Rank	Outlet	Owner, Company	Owner, Individuals	Owner (%)	
Television	1	FTV	Radio-Televizija Federacije Bosne i Hercegovine		100	
	2	BHT 1	Radiotelevizija Bosne i Hercegovine		100	
	3	Nova BH	United Group	BC Partners		52.3
				Senior management at BC Partners		38.5
				Kohlberg Kravis Roberts (KKR)		6.8
				EBRD		2.4
	4	OBN	Open Broadcast Network	Ivan Čaleta	100	
	5	BN TV	RTV BN	Vladimir "Vlado" Trišić	100	
Newspaper	1	Dnevni Avaz	Avaz-Roto Press	Azra Radončić	100	
	2	Oslobodjenje	MIMS Group	Mujo Selimovic	100	
	3	Euroblic	Ringier Group	La Mobiliere	12.5	

		MIMS Group	Ringier Family	37.5
			Marc Walder	12.5
	Oslobodjenj e		Kohlberg Kravis Roberts (KKR)	17.8
		Axel Springer <sup>5</sup>	CPPIB	6.5
			Friede Springer	11.3
	Mapo	Mapo Media LLC	Mathias Döpfner	11
			Axel Sven Springer	2.5
	Gazeta Tema	Tema	Ariane Melanie Springer	0.5
			Friede Springer Foundation	0.5
	4 Nezavisne novine	NIGD DNN	Unknown	Unknown
	5 Glas Srpske	NIGD DNN	Unknown	Unknown
Radio	1 Federalni	Radio-Televizija Federacije Bosne i Herzegovine		100
	2 Radio Republike Srpske	Radio Televizija Republike Srpske		100
	3 BH Radio	Radiotelevizija Bosne i Hercegovine		100
	4 BN Radio	RTV BN	Vladimir "Vlado" Trišić	100
	5 RSG Radio	RSG Group	Adnan Osmanagic	100
Online	1 Avaz.ba	Avaz-Roto Press	Azra Radončić	100
	2 Klix.ba	Intersoft	Dario Simic	Unknown
			Mario Simic	Unknown
	3 Hercegovina. info	Unknown	Josip Budimir	Unknown
			Unknown	Unknown
4 Nezavisne.co m	NIGD DNN	Unknown	Unknown	
5 Rtvbn.com	RTV BN	Vladimir "Vlado" Trišić	100	

<sup>5</sup> Shares are rounded to the nearest tenth.

# Results

## Television

The two most popular television stations in Bosnia are state-owned channels FTV and BHT. In 2005, Bosnia passed the Law on the Public Broadcasting System of Bosnia and Herzegovina enshrining the need for three public service broadcasters: one that would be considered the national level broadcaster and two that would appeal to the separate populations living within the country. BHT is operated by the national level broadcaster Radiotelevizija Bosne i Hercegovine (BHRT). FTV is operated by the public broadcasting service for the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Radio-Televizija Federacije Bosne i Hercegovine (RTVBiH). The third public broadcaster is Radio Televizija Republike Srpske (RTRS), which broadcasts for the Republika Srpska. RTRS runs a television channel of the same name that is also popular but did not make our list of top outlets.<sup>6</sup>

Nova BH, formerly known as Pink BH until 2018, is the third most popular television channel. Nova BH is currently owned by the United Group. The majority shareholder of this group of primarily foreign investors is British private equity firm BC Partners, while US-based Kohlberg Kravis Roberts (KKR) owns a minority share. KKR is also an owner of the Bosnian newspaper imprint Euroblic.<sup>7</sup>

The fourth most-consumed television outlet, OBN is a commercial network solely owned by Ivan Caleta.<sup>8</sup> A Croatian by birth, Caleta has reportedly adopted Bosnian citizenship. Lastly, BN TV, a television channel popular with Bosnian-Serbs, is another television channel with a single owner: Vladimir "Vlado" Trisic. Trisic also owns the

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<sup>6</sup> Law on the Public Broadcasting System of Bosnia and Herzegovina, [http://www.sze.hu/~smuk/Nyilvanossag\\_torvenyek\\_east\\_south\\_eur/Jogforr%C3%A1sok/M%C3%A9dia/BiH%20PublicBroadc%20SYSTEM%20LAW%2078-05.pdf](http://www.sze.hu/~smuk/Nyilvanossag_torvenyek_east_south_eur/Jogforr%C3%A1sok/M%C3%A9dia/BiH%20PublicBroadc%20SYSTEM%20LAW%2078-05.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> "KKR sells majority stake in United Group, SBB has new co-owner," B92, 27 September 2018, <https://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/srbija/kkr-prodao-vecinski-udeo-junajted-grupe-sbb-ima-novog-suvlasnika-1448907>.

<sup>8</sup> "Ivan Caleta takes over OBN television," Oslobodjenje, 23 November 2019, <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/ekonomija/ivan-caleta-preuzima-obn-televiziju-509414>.



radio station BN Radio and online outlet Rtvbn.com. Trisic has been an outspoken opponent of Bosnian Serb President Milorad Dodik.<sup>9</sup>

While the most popular television outlets are state-owned, they serve different purposes and appeal to different populations. There is some cause for concern about foreign ties in the top television outlets, with Nova BH being owned by UK and US partners and OBN's Caleta being tied to Croatia, as foreign actors can present a vulnerability for the domestic media market. Overall, the top television outlets do represent a diverse mix of political viewpoints, even if there is some centralized ownership.

## Print

The majority of Bosnia's top print outlets appear to be wholly owned by prominent families. Bosnia's newspaper with the highest circulation is Dnevni Avaz, owned by Azra Radoncic of Avaz-Roto Press. Azra Radoncic is the ex-wife of prominent politician Fahrudin Radoncic, who many believe still controls the company.<sup>10</sup> Radoncic has served as Minister of Security and ran for President on multiple occasions as part of the Union for a Better Future of BiH (SBB) party. Dnevni Avaz's online edition, the website Avaz.ba, is also the top online outlet in the country.

The second most popular print outlet is Oslobodjenje, owned by prominent Bosnian businessman Mujo Selimovic. Mujo Selimovic is the son of a wealthy businessman (Hilmo Selimovic) who owns several Bosnian companies including the Sarajevo Brewery.<sup>11</sup> Both father and son are connected to the Party of Democratic Action (SDA). The online edition of Oslobodjenje is also popular in Bosnia.

Euroblic, the third most-popular print outlet, is the only top print outlet not owned by a prominent Bosnian family. The Bosnian version of the Serbian paper Blic, Euroblic is

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<sup>9</sup> "Director of BN Television Vlado Trisic for BUKU," <https://www.6yka.com/novosti/direktor-bn-televizije-vlado-trisic-za-buku-straha-od-milorada-dodika-nem-a-na-njegove-napade-smo-navikli>.

<sup>10</sup> Peace Institute (2014), p. 132: Media Integrity Matters: Reclaiming public service values in media and journalism. <https://www.mirovni-institut.si/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/media-integrity-matters.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> CIMA (2016), p. 7: Captured News Media. <https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/CIMA-Balkans-Captured-Media.pdf>.

owned by Swiss publishing organization Ringier Axel Springer Media AG. KKR, who is a shareholder of television channel Pink BH, is also a shareholder of Euroblic.

The fourth most popular outlet, Nezavisne novine, was previously owned by prominent war journalist Zeljko Kopanja, who died in 2016. It is unclear who owns the newspaper since his death, though his son has been reported as stepping in as director.<sup>12</sup> At the time of his death, Kopanja also owned the fifth most popular outlet, Glas Srpske. Other shareholders may own minority stakes in both outlets, but it is unclear what those shares may be and who those shareholders are.

In the print sector, there are many cases of ownership being obscured. From ownership being registered to family members, as is the case with Dnevni Avaz, or limited information about particular owners being available to the public, as is the case with Nezavisne novine and Glas Srpske, it is unclear who truly controls much of the print media in Bosnia.

## Radio

The radio sector in Bosnia is dominated by the state-owned public broadcasters. Each of the three public broadcasters is represented in the top outlets. The most consumed outlet is Federalni, operated by RTVBiH. The second most consumed outlet is Radio Republike Srpske, operated by RTRS. Rounding out the public broadcasters is the third most consumed radio outlet, BH Radio, operated by national level operator BHRT.

The fourth most consumed radio station is BN Radio. BN Radio is owned by Vlado Trisic, who also runs BN TV and the online outlet Rtvbn.com.

Lastly, the fifth most popular radio station in Bosnia is Radio Stari Grad (RSG Radio). RSG Radio is part of the RSG Group that runs one other radio station along with providing marketing and production services.<sup>13</sup> RSG Radio is owned by Adnan

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<sup>12</sup> "Čestitke RTRS-u iz javnih institucija i preduzeća u Srpskoj." RTRS. April 19, 2019. <https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=334442>.

<sup>13</sup> RSG Media, <https://rsgmedia.ba/o-nama/>.

Osmanagic, who has remarked on occasion that he views RSG Radio as an outsider in the Bosnian radio market.<sup>14</sup>

The radio medium in Bosnia is dominated by state-owned broadcasters, who run the three most popular radio stations in the country. Additionally, all but one outlet, RSG Radio, is affiliated with an outlet that appears in another medium. Ownership of top Bosnian radio stations is centered around the same names as other top outlets, decreasing the diversity of news content across mediums.

## Online

Online outlets share relatively centralized ownership with other mediums, as many of the top outlets in other mediums additionally operate as a website. These include the most popular site Avaz.ba, followed by the fourth and fifth most popular sites Nezavisne.com and Rtvbn.com. Avaz.ba is the online edition of Dnevni Avaz and is owned by Azra Radoncic. Nezavisne.com is the online outlet of Nezavisne novine, which is believed to be owned by the Kopanja family. Rtvbn.com is the online version of BN TV, owned by Vlado Trisic.

The second most consumed online outlet in Bosnia is Klix.ba, which is co-owned by brothers Dario and Mario Simic, who started the site in 2000 as an online-only outlet. Klix.ba is known as an engaging media outlet for fielding a large number of consumer comments on its website.<sup>15</sup>

Rounding out the list is the third most popular online outlet, Hercegovina.info. Little information about the ownership of this website could be found.<sup>16</sup> Hercegovina.info did publish on its site a short news blurb about one of its reputed co-owners, Josip Budimir, but the identity of other owners and their potential ownership shares remains opaque.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Osmanagic: Radio Stari Grad survived because it was an outsider," Radio Slobodna Europa, 30 January 2017, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/intervju-adnan-osmanagic-rsg/28266226.html>.

<sup>15</sup> "News Portals," Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/balkanmedia/news-portals>.

<sup>16</sup> "Who are the owners of the most influential private media in BiH," Grad Busovaca, 10 March 2016, <https://grad-busovaca.com/tko-su-vlasnici-najutjecajnijih-privatnih-medija-u-bih/>.

<sup>17</sup> "New co-owner of the Hercegovina.info portal," 28 May 2019, <https://www.hercegovina.info/vijesti/bih/novi-suvlasnik-portala-hercegovina-info-zelimo-biti-vodeci-portal-hrvata-u-bih-164422/164422/>.

Unlike each of the other media sectors, all of the top online outlets have a different owner. However, there are several instances, including Avaz.ba, Nezavisne.com, and Hercegovina.info, where ownership information is not available or is obscured. Additionally, many of the online outlet owners also own outlets in other media sectors, meaning that ownership is centralized across top news outlets and the overall diversity of news content is limited.

## Conclusion

In this brief, we have presented an overview of the domestic media ownership environment of Bosnia. The Kremlin's channels to exert malign influence via Bosnian media appear to be relatively limited. Russian state-owned media is less widely consumed in Bosnia, and the Kremlin does not appear to have an overt ownership stake in the country's top television, print, radio, or online media outlets. In fact, the foreign ownership links we identified were most often Western European or US-based investors. However, the absence of a strong regulatory environment to mandate transparent disclosure of ownership of Bosnia's media outlets means that we could be undercounting potential Kremlin or other foreign linkages that are obscured from view, especially given the high rate of turnover in media ownership in recent years.

This opacity regarding media ownership has an additional repercussion—it increases the vulnerability of Bosnian citizens to potential bias in domestic reporting. This risk is exacerbated by the high degree of segmentation in the Bosnian media market, as the majority of domestic media outlets are connected to wealthy local business owners or political elite, which tend to orient their reporting to appeal to a specific ethnic group or political party, rather than a broader and more diverse constituency. Additionally, the centralization of ownership among top outlets could mean increased vulnerability to foreign, malign influence, as the small groups of owners who own large shares of the Bosnian media market could be targeted.

Lastly, the dominance of state broadcasters in both the television and radio markets should be noted. Bosnia does have three public broadcasters representing diverse population interests. However, having significant media power in the hands of the state could be a cause for concern, especially on politically sensitive issues.