

Genuine Domestic Change or Fake Compliance: Political Pervasiveness in the Serbian Media

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Abstract : Since the election of Aleksandar Vučić and the Progressives, Serbia has witnessed a slow decline in media freedom, which has been worse than in the 1990s. Although the government adopted a package of three laws in August 2014 to bring the media landscape up to European standards, the implementation of the laws has been limited and marginal, with the progressives engaging in fake compliance. The adoption of the new media strategy for 2020-2025 in 2020 has not led to genuine domestic reform and compliance with EU conditionality. In fact, the EU Commission and journalists' associations in Serbia have criticised the decline in Serbia's media freedom citing continued attacks on journalists and indirect political and economic control through advertising and project co-financing, which continue to be features of the Serbian media landscape. In the absence of clear and credible EU conditionality, the decline of media freedom is in the eye of the beholder, where the gap between public engagements with Serbian politicians and the critical stance of progress reports regarding the degradation of the media have enabled Serbian elites to exploit this ambiguity to continue their strategy of fake compliance vis-a-vis rule of law. This study used a mixed methods approach combining both primary and secondary sources with those semi-structured interviews via Zoom, email, and in person with EU and Serbian officials and journalists. Our findings add to the studies where the lack of clear and credible conditionality has allowed Serbia politicians to exploit them in a manner that would suit their own interests, finding new means to retain their control over the media. We argued and concluded that it is this discrepancy between public engagements with Serbia and the progress reports in the area of freedom of expression that has not led to genuine domestic media reforms in Serbia and instead allowed Serbian elites to engage in a strategy of fake and even non-compliance towards media freedom conditionality.

Keywords : media freedom, EU conditionality, Serbia, fake compliance, EU integration, Chapter 23, justice and fundamental rights

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