

**HOW PAPERS IN SERBIA REPORTED ON A CERTAIN EVENT:
BERETS IN 100 WAYS**

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The course of the trial of suspects in the murder of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic, committed in March last year, which is in full swing in a court specially created for the occasion, has been disturbed to a great extent by something utterly scandalous that happened during the testimony of Djindjic's personal bodyguard. Namely, eight members of a disbanded police unit, known under the name "Green Berets," appeared in the courtroom, six of them wearing the unit's insignia – the head of a wolf with a red beret. The apparent provocation acquires its real significance if one bears in mind that the principal suspect, assassin Zvezdan Jovanovic, as well as two others whose names are high on the list of a large number of suspected accomplices, come from this special police unit, disbanded right after the assassination. On top of this, Milorad Lukovic Legija, who according to a lot of practically certain allegations is the top organizer of the killing and who has been on the run since the day of the assassination, commanded the breakaway group.

The men wearing the former red berets' shirts obviously intended to convey at least several important messages. First of all, that this para-police unit, although officially non-existent, still supports those who killed Djindjic and approves of their act and the idea of murdering him, and also to convey an open threat that the spirit of the "Red Berets" lives on and that no trial can prevent their illegal operation. The public at large was shocked by this news, broadcast the same day in all electronic media, striking fear in the hearts of people such as they felt during the state of emergency declared right after the Prime Minister was killed. Still, the next day in daily papers published in Belgrade, as well as in weeklies that appeared a few days later, the courtroom promotion of the disbanded police unit and the open manifestation of their existence and potential force, was treated in completely different ways – from a sensation that must unquestionably take up at least half the first page, to a brief notice somewhere in the middle of the paper, just to garnish witness testimonies in the trial that day.

"Politika" and "Danas" are, without doubt, the two most influential dailies in Serbia, regardless of their circulations which are highly surpassed by the numerous yellow press. Although they are considered convincingly the most serious and most reliable, these two papers covered the courtroom appearance of the "Red Berets" in completely different ways. While "Danas" featured an extensive article on the front page about what happened, without relating it to a report about the trial placed on page five, "Politika" decided to make the whole thing marginal by placing an article about the trial on page 11, along with a box containing the former police unit threat, accompanied by the incumbent police commander's comment and reaction by the Civil Union of Serbia, the only political party that spoke up on the occasion.

The majority of the other daily papers, more or less, followed the example of "Politika." The high circulation "Blic" did not even mention the unusual event on the first page, although the trial for Djindjic's murder took up considerable space on that page. The "Red Berets" were mentioned only on page five in the form of a brief notice, without any comment or emphasis on the significance of what happened. "Vecernje Novine" is the only paper that decided to use a photograph. The first page of this paper shows these men in shirts with a wolf's head, but the headline and sub-headlines related to the trial focus on other details. Only the caption under the picture may suggest what it is about. But "Novosti" was the most confusing this time because it is not entirely clear from a report on pages 14 and 15 what actually happened since focus was placed on a statement by the police commander without a clear description of what his comment was about. "Kurir" and "Balkan" chose a similar approach. Both papers entirely neglected what happened, so much that "Kurir" dedicated the front page to an event unrelated to the trial that found its place only on page five.

It is very interesting that the editors of "Glas," whose owner is at the same time the owner of "Kurir," covered what happened very clearly in the headline on the first page "Red Berets in court supported killer," and also that the low-circulation "Ekspres," an edition of the "Politika" company, emphasized the importance of what happened through the huge headline "Ghost of special operations unit" and a photograph of the unit from its archives.

Along with all differences in approach offered by daily papers, it is almost unbelievable what happened in this regard in the most influential Serbian weeklies. While "Vreme" brought a photograph on the front page with the superscript headline "Scandals" and an extensive article saying, among other things, that "there is something that may be called the spirit of the Special

Operations Unit which is shared by all of its members – the belief that in the protection of Serbianhood as defined to them by the Milosevic regime, everything is allowed and they are absolutely untouchable in their ‘mission,’” NIN does not mention the courtroom appearance of the berets in a single word! While in “Vreme” an article on this issue is featured in the top place in the paper, printed in white letters on a black background, NIN decided not to use even a brief notice to accompany a relatively extensive article on the course of the trial.

The completely different ways in which the print media treated the public return of one of the most obscure police units operating in the past decade in Serbia, and many of its members, without doubt, beyond its borders as well, is almost unprecedented in Serbian journalism. Accepting the argument that in the media in Serbia there is a lot of ignorance, much non-professionalism and everyday editorial omissions, it seems that this case cannot be interpreted as only that. Is it really possible that those who edit papers do not recognize the message that was sent, or is it perhaps that some of them, by deliberately neglecting it, are reducing its significance until the moment when it will be both clearer and more dangerous?

Not much was written about the “Red Berets” and their activities even before, except in two cases: when in early 2001 they decided to start a public armed strike that threatened to turn into a rebellion, and upon Djindjic’s assassination, after which they were disbanded. Secrecy in their work and operation, far from public eyes and open civil control, had certainly allowed the unit to engage in numerous activities contrary to the law and in the end by killing the prime minister to try to commit coup d’etat. Still, the “Red Berets” at that time were insufficiently interesting and inaccessible to everyone. Now, in the case of their announcement of renewed activities during a murder trial in which their commanders are suspected, the media is fiercely divided - into those that treat what happened as a first-rate scandal and those that completely push it to the margins.

It would certainly be wrong at this moment to attempt to find out the reasons or the axle along which the media in this case (and generally as well) is divided. Especially because there is not too much logic in the whole matter: one paper belonging to the same owner is suppressing what happened, while the other is emphasizing it; “Politika” pushes it to the margins, while its low-circulation edition “Ekspres” features it on the first page; with the expected fierce reaction from “Danas,” the disinterest on the part of “Blic” is unexpected.

What is now sure is that nothing is accidental; what is impossible to say is what the essence is. There is no doubt now that the coming period and the events ahead of us will shed light more clearly on this absolutely unusual mystery involving the Serbian daily and weekly press. It will certainly be clearer “who belongs to whom at this moment,” and who is working for whom in the entirely unclear political situation in Serbia.

But it will definitely be confirmed that once again in this case, as so many times before, the media cannot be innocent. Even if mistakes are made unintentionally. It is most likely that in this case the already somewhat forgotten telephones of editors-in-chief, whose numbers are known only to those who need to know them, have been working again.

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