

**MEDIA IN SERBIA FOLLOWING SHIFT IN GOVERNMENT:
NEW NATIONAL AWAKENING**

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Three important events that occurred during the past 20 days in Serbia and around it have greatly affected overall political life and consequently, indirectly and directly, media themselves. The ultimate success of so-called democratic parties (Democratic Party of Serbia, G17 plus and Serbian Renewal Movement) in forming a minority government with the support of Milosevic's Socialist Party of Serbia coincided with two tragic events – a fire at the monastery of Hilandar and unrest in Kosovo. As a result of this, the nationally oriented government simultaneously found itself in an unfavorable, as well as a favorable situation: Hilandar and Kosovo and the national feelings sparked by these two events called for an urgent and well planned political reaction, diplomatic activity and unexpectedly quick activism on the part of all government ministries. On the other hand, national homogeneity, last time pronounced to such an extent during NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia (March-June 1999), gave the new government a kind of undeclared state of emergency in which conditions were created for stronger pressure on media and more open expectation of loyalty caused and “justified” by the general national tragedy.

In his first public statement, new Culture and Media Minister Dragan Kojadinovic, former editor in chief of Belgrade's Studio B television and senior official in Vuk Draskovic's party, promised that, instead of expected lustration, he will try to find out and reveal the names of all journalists who were working for state security during the past period along with their regular work. Not long after that, Kojadinovic took the liberty of publicly praising or criticizing the work of media during the first days of the conflicts in Kosovo, after which a concrete measure followed: the Serbian government, in emergency procedure, dismissed the director and editor in chief of Radio Television Serbia, appointing to his position the most controversial figure in the entire media scene – the journalist Aleksandar Tijanic. Known as the founder of several highly watched television stations (in whose popularity illegally played movies

and sports broadcasts played a huge role), columnist for many daily and weekly papers, but also as information minister in one of Slobodan Milosevic's governments, Tijanic was appointed to the top position at RTS with full disregard for the new law on broadcasting. The decision to apply the outdated law on companies instead was the first major move taken by the new government whose leading people had always firstly insisted on legalism.

For now, the head of national television has not made any visible editorial moves, but dismissals and appointments, as well as detailed programming intervention, can be expected. After all, Tijanic himself announced something like that while speaking in the primetime news program. He said, among other things, that the previous management of the house should be punished with "25 on the bottom."

There was no fierce public reaction to the communist-like dismissal of the old and legally doubtful appointment of the new director. This is most probably because the public had been expecting this kind of solution for a long time since Tijanic, several years ago, after changing many political options, became close to incumbent head of the Serbian government Vojislav Kostunica.

On the other hand, the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia, Anem and other associations and groups of journalists and media, have constantly insisted on amendments being passed to the law on broadcasting. But they primarily insisted on the issue of re-election of Broadcasting Council members. Meanwhile, carrying the baggage of resignations of some of its members and the illegal election of others, the Broadcasting Council practically has no political credibility or ability to pass decisions within its jurisdiction. Of course, this all maintains the situation that was inherited in the broadcasting sphere, including the enormous number of electronic media airing practically without any order or necessary democratic control, as well as a delay in the process of transforming RTS into a public service.

The situation with regard to print media is similar. Fifteen dailies currently publish regularly in Serbia, some of which, without regard for the fundamental principles of their profession, build their circulations exclusively on sensations, gossip and unverified information, usually put out in such a way that it morally disqualifies someone from public and political life. Thus, in "Balkan," "Centar", "Nacional" and other daily representatives of the most extreme sensationalist press that appeared over the past two years, one can find everyday articles liable to responsibility for

slander, defamation or other criminal acts that can be committed via the press. Of course, the number of pending court cases on this ground grows by the day and they usually turn into a farce which moves the whole matter from its essence. In other words, at this moment, in many newspapers in Serbia you can write anything about anyone without the author of the article having any serious consequences, unless we mean by that a potential marathon court case before a trial chamber that only brings the sued journalist desired publicity.

In the general confusion in Serbian media, it is not easy to perceive “who is whose” and “who is working for whom,” especially since the circle of those who have influence on media in Serbia does not contain only political parties or prominent politicians; it also contains various secret services, new businessmen and mafia groups. Still, at least when it comes to several of the most important and influential media, there are no open or everyday examples of defamation. These outlets try to adhere to the standards of the profession, to the degree possible due to the modest number of educated journalistic staff in Serbia. Of course, the above events at Hilandar and first of all the latest escalation in Kosovo, as well as the national homogenization that accompanies them, have greatly determined the editorial policies of the majority of media outlets. As before, when the people had to be gathered around a single goal, media reports in both cases have been full of exaggeration and pathos. Instead of facts, they have resorted to emotions and unverified news, and instead of information from both sides, primarily on Kosovo, reports have relied exclusively on Serb sources. This kind of reporting fully fits into the current political trend since the new government, instead of concrete diplomatic action and acceptable political solutions, is offering platitudes on “Kosovo as the heart of Serbia” and “holy Serbian land without which the people will lose their identity” and a “territory that must be defended at any cost.”

Some dailies went a step further. The high circulation “Kurir” at the height of the events in Kosovo on its front page printed only two words on black background: “Rise, Serbia!” There were calls for a concrete answer to the violence against Serbs in other media as well. What is more, the reporting on Kosovo greatly contributed to a massive uncontrolled citizens’ protest in the streets of bigger cities, resulting in the torching of mosques in Belgrade and Nis. TV stations also demonstrated their commitment to the “new Serbian cause,” first of all “Pink” and “BKTV,” both owned by big “businessmen” and former Milosevic associates, which interrupted their regular program schedules and reported day and night on the events in Kosovo and the

awakening of national protests. These two stations, among other things wanting to show their loyalty to the new government as efficiently as they did with success in 2002, have practically been competing in national zeal, which is in line with the new non-aggressive, but not harmless nationalism.

The terminology that prevailed in the media also reminded of the past times: in action in Kosovo are "Shiptar terrorists," "hordes armed to their teeth," "separatists running wild," encouraged by the "lies of the international community."

Of course, as in the years of war in the former Yugoslavia, by their balanced reports, attempts to use facts to compete against rumors, as well as efforts to reach news from other sources, the increasingly popular radio and television B92, daily "Danas" and weekly "Vreme" have again stood out.

The dynamics of events, extraordinary circumstances and national homogenization have to a large extent postponed the government's concrete actions in the media sphere, if we exclude the dismissal of the RTS director and editor in chief, which evidently had to be done in fear that state television will not be national enough in crucial moments. The government's next moves are awaited. The RTS director himself announced that, as customary, he will be radical. On the other hand, for the who knows which time, he repeated that he does not belong to any political option. It remains to be seen what the announced radicalism will mean.

But, along with RTS, the new Serbian government has ahead of it a lot of work in other media aspects as well. There is no doubt that something must urgently be done in the area of media legislation, chiefly with regard to implementation of passed laws. This certainly means concrete action in two directions: regulating the work of print media, reducing them to a reasonable number, and establishing a code of basic journalism ethics, as well as extensive work on determining the possible number of radio and television stations, allocating licenses to those who meet requirements and eliminating broadcasting rights for those who have been on air illegally for at least a decade.

Having experience with the political options and parties that constitute the incumbent government, aware of their traditional inefficiency, rhetoric commitment to reform without any concrete moves and ambition to stay in power as long as possible, it is not hard to predict that the forthcoming media work will be too much for them to bite

off. It is more likely that the new government will try, with the help of national romanticism, to impose its influence on as many media outlets as possible. This campaign will not be too complicated when it comes to influential private television stations. It seems that the state RTS will not be too hard a nut to crack either. Judging by everything, it seems that battles will be fought over influential print media.

Is the media scene in Serbia in the coming months again going to see a division into so-called “independent ones” and those others?

Probably yes. Of course, one must bear in mind that “independent” will actually mean professional, while those others will only be favorably disposed, but not subordinated to the authorities, as some of them had been until just three years ago.

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