

MEDIA IN SERBIA FOUR YEARS AFTER MILOSEVIC: ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK

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With regard to the media in Serbia, one may say, with a lot of arguments, that during more than one decade of Milosevic's dictatorship, it was more developed and better than others areas of society. This, of course, is true of independent newspapers, radio and television stations which, in completely irregularly circumstances, faced with the fiercest repression did their work professionally, over time gaining in scope, significance and reputation. Finally, rising above "political party mouthpieces," which is what government-controlled outlets were, the independent media played a crucial role in the October uprising and overthrowing of the government. On the other hand, it is easy to prove that since then, over the next four years, it is the media that made the least progress, losing the race in professionalism, working in line with the rules of the market, privatization, transformation and legislation. In other words, since October 2000, some positive and a lot of negative things happened to the media in Serbia, making the situation chaotic and the prospect insecure and very distant.

The fact that important media laws have not been passed yet, that the provisions of the laws that have been passed are not being applied, that there is no regulated media market yet, that information on media ownership is not available, that privatization is taking place against the rules, that there is no foundation for frequency allocation, and that examples of defamation and libel in the press have become everyday, became quite ordinary a long time ago. True, these things are talked about often and eagerly, but almost nothing is done to change the situation. The situation of disorder and arbitrariness is ideal for a new awakening of the practice of threatening journalists, bribing editors, spreading political influence using the media and turning a deaf ear to the fundamental ethical principles of the profession. Some old media cadres are appearing here and there in new roles, the most drastic example undoubtedly being the recent Association of Journalists of Serbia and Montenegro Lifetime Achievement Award given to Dragan Radevic, former editor of the Novi Sad "Dnevnik," who, along with the

darkest degradation of the paper's reputation, left the outlet with almost millions in foreign currency debts.

Only two media laws are in effect in Serbia – Law on Broadcasting and Law on Public Information – but neither is being applied. The Broadcasting Council has been disbanded, and the way in which a new one is supposed to be chosen promises such shenanigans that the Anem (Association of Independent Electronic Media) and Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia have decided not to propose their candidates, believing that the entire process, as well as the expected result, will be pointless. The Law on Freedom of Access to Information is undergoing Assembly procedure at this moment, and one of the envisioned amendments threatens to make journalists' work harder, instead of easier, since it stipulates to make this profession equal to citizens, as a result of which journalists may end up waiting for information from state bodies up to 15 days. Finally, with regard to legislation as an essential start for any serious change, what are lacking at the moment are a law on advertising, as well as a law on the prevention of monopoly which is very important for this field although it does not belong to the set of media laws.

The state, despite recent clear recommendations from the Council of Europe, continues to directly fund media outlets which should have been transformed into public services a long time ago, and by far the most money from the budget is used for RTS and the state news agency Tanjug. Along with consciously creating unfair competition for the other media, the authorities certainly want to use this to maintain the necessary control and possibility of influence. True, one cannot say that state television and the state news agency put out programs that only suit the authorities, but this principle of funding is used in the unstable political situation in order to come in handy "in case of dire need."

On the other hand, the enormous number of electronic and print media outlets – at the moment there are around 2,000 radio and television stations on air (120 in Belgrade only), and some 15 papers coming out in Belgrade only – are faced with total chaos on the market and absolute insecurity regarding their business. Moreover, in the broadcasting field, there are still evident monopolies and inherited privileges, chiefly in the large number of local radio and television stations and certainly in the two most

transparent cases – television Pink, now already a regional station, whose owner is a former official of a political party that was headed by Mirjana Markovic (wife of Slobodan Milosevic, for two years now unavailable to the Serbian authorities which are criminally prosecuting her) and television BK, whose owner Bogoljub Karic founded a political party and quite successfully participated in the race for president of the Republic, of course abundantly using his TV station's capacities in the election campaign. In light of the scope of work pending in the broadcasting field, primarily selection of new Broadcasting Council members, and then creation of a Telecommunications Agency, it is likely that regulation of the frequency allocation process cannot be expected in less than two years, on the condition that work starts immediately, which is certainly not to be expected.

The print media, among other things, is also faced with practically everyday examples of the most drastic violations of professional journalistic ethics, as well as numerous court cases against journalists. In newspapers in Serbia, most of all in the large number of tabloids, one can write just about anything. A recent survey of the number of articles in several dailies showed that even in so-called serious papers, every day one can find 10 or so articles containing elements of defamation or slander in the press, providing legal ground for starting criminal proceedings. On the other hand, despite declaring efforts to approach European standards, the act of defamation is still contained in the penal code with the threat of a prison sentence. However, due to the slow work of courts, cases are often endless and each new hearing actually affirms the journalist and again brings the defamed side to newspaper pages by reminding of his alleged act or words over which the case was initiated. In light of this, those who feel they have been defamed usually give up hoping everything will be forgotten sooner this way.

Of course, there are absurdities on the other side as well. Journalists and editors of a local paper and local television station from Majdanpek (eastern Serbia) were recently sentenced to pay fines because their outlets, without any comment, carried a press release issued by a town museum regarding a piece of art. The museum – author of the press release in which the artist found defamation – was not sued.

Due to all this, one can hear in professional journalist circles, more and more frequently, the opinion that the issue of journalist ethics and professionalism should by no means be left to the state, and some initiatives are moving in the direction of self-regulation. The creation of a Media Council is increasingly being mentioned. Its task would be to deal with ethical issues and to try to influence the passing of rules on what can, and what cannot be published/broadcast in the media. On the other hand, the number of those who believe only in harsh penalties and their efficient implementation, bearing in mind the civilization moment that Serbia is presently in, is not small either.

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