

**DAILY PRESS IN SERBIA – ONE EVENT, ONE DAY AND MANY DIFFERENCES:
ASSASSIN, OR A MANIAC**

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Last week, the public in Serbia was deeply disturbed by the event that happened in one of the busiest Belgrade streets, fully reminding of the happenings preceding the assassination of then Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić on 12 March 2003. In evening hours on 1 December this year, unknown driver in black Audi hit against the convoy of escorted vehicles driving Serbian President Boris Tadić, collided with one of the escorting vehicles and escaped into unknown direction. The event can in no way look as coincidence, concerning the fact that, several days ahead of the assassination, a truck hit upon Đinđić's convoy in almost identical way. This time, too, the attacker was not caught immediately, of course. The electronic media that broadcast the details of that evening's event minute by minute, almost left no doubt that this was also an assassination attempt, while President Tadić tried to give his statement a calming effect, with the suggestion that the matter was certainly serious.

It was only next evening, twenty four hours after the incident happened, that the police issued a seemingly relieving statement: the attacker was identified, it was a person irritated by the way the escorted convoy moved, so he decided to disrupt their movement; according to the statement of the minister of police, the event had nothing to do with assassination attempt, it was nothing but a traffic offence! Adding to the absurdity of the situation is the fact that the offender, who drove Audi vehicle that evening, was a security service member, employed by American Embassy in Belgrade, the resident of Serbia.

Certainly, no-one stayed indifferent at this turn of events, and numerous questions were popping up by themselves: how was it possible that all the huge escort accompanying the President of the state failed to immediately catch the person that committed the traffic offence, how come that none really remembered the registration plate number of the attacker's vehicle, how did the irritated driver come to the idea to attack a convoy of police vehicles and, finally, the most incredible - how did an American Embassy employee happen to get involved in such an action. Final touch to the general confusion was given by the Embassy itself, when they confirmed that the allegations of the police were correct.

While electronic media responded to this – mildly speaking – unclear situation according to the basic rules of the profession, immediately publicising all they could get about the event, the press had at least hours to think it over and take a stance. This is the reason why Belgrade daily newspapers and numerous tabloids appeared that morning with a variety of viewpoints on the event. Their diametrically different writing can be correctly interpreted only if we bear in mind the most important fact – the President of Serbia Boris Tadić is the member of Democratic Party, which is in opposition, while the police segment, including the Minister of Police Dragan Jočić, belongs to the ruling Democratic Party of Serbia.

The cover page of "Politika", the oldest daily in Serbia and certainly one with the reputation of a being "serious", brings the assertion that the case is solved, while the headline "Collision in Zvezda" (the part of Belgrade where everything happened), unambiguously implies a banal incident that cannot have any serious consequences. A wider text in the seventh page explains how the incident happened, using a tone pertinent to a newspaper articles covering any other traffic accidents that are frequently happening in the town. It is only the statements by certain politicians on the same page of "Politika" that suggest that there might have been something else in the background of the event, indeed.

Influential, analytical, but also a low-rate „Danas“ discovers quite another dimension of this event, both through its headlines and by the space devoted to its coverage. This newspaper did not miss to clearly remind the readers of the amazing similarity with the event that preceded Đinđić's murder, while an article written by one of the journalists of

this newspaper remains packed with warnings pointing to the omissions, even certain illogicalities in the investigation and in statements by the police.

The best-rated newspaper, “Večernje Novosti“, tried to be professional. This newspaper writes: “The Minister says that there was no assassination attempt”, leaving room for the readers to judge whether they would trust the Minister or give preference to the interpretation that the assassination attempt against the President did happen. Anyway, in the stile of the increasingly explicit neo-national editorial policy, “Novosti” did not resist the temptation to point up a huge headline – “An American drove the Audi”, although the person in the vehicle was allegedly only a resident of Serbia employed by the Embassy of USA.

“Blic” leaves no doubt that this was not a mere incident. The man from Audi was called “attacker on the President” by this newspaper; in the prominent place, they publicised numerous questions addressed to the Minister of Police. Certainly the most interesting among them is the last one: “How is it possible that an American Embassy employee then saw escorted vehicles for the first time in his life?”

Finally, the event was dealt with by tabloids, too, in their own specific way. “Balkan“ states that it was a false alarm, “Nacional“ is sure that it was an incident, while “Kurir“, which traditionally disfavours Tadić, goes a step further. Under the title “Staged Incident“, this yellow daily clearly suggests that the entire matter was intentionally dramatised, adding that it was impossible to turn into Đinđić overnight, using a theatrical assassination. In addition, the second page of “Kurir“, in a prominent place, brings a title: “Tadić: They Want to Kill me!“. Such a ‘cite’ could not have been written without ill-meant aims, because Tadić has never said anything like that by now, and his statement that he already “received various kinds of anonymous letters’ does not really imply that he is in a panic fear of death.

Until recently, a clear line divided daily press in Serbia into sensationalistic and serious, while the issue of tabloidisation and everyday examples of defamation and offence has turned into the most important in journalistic profession. On the other hand, it was necessary to place significant efforts if, seeking through the nuances, one wanted to pick up the understanding as to what newspapers were inclined to one or the other of two

dominant political options in contemporary Serbia - national and traditional on one side, or modern and European on the other. It seems that the velocity required for the reaction in the case of the attack against President Tadić left no enough room for undertones and covert messages.

One single event, regardless of its importance, cannot serve as a base for far-reaching conclusions. Still, a brief overview of major daily press in Serbia, covering traffic offence (as the police claim) or the assassination attempt, which irresistibly reminds of the similar event that happened immediately before the assassination of Đinđić, offers the possibility of selection and classification. This is the line by which, in the general atmosphere of political divisions in Serbia, the newspapers have also divided themselves. In Tadić's case, "Danas" and "Blic" have proved inclined to the President of Serbia; "Politika" has favoured the official stance of the police and government; "Večernje Novosti" offered a balanced approach, never concealing a certain level of resistance to America; "Balkan", "Nacional" and "Kurir", above all searching for sensations, openly chose a sort of ridicule for the entire event, which clearly illustrates their positions.

Undoubtedly, it will be interesting to follow-up and see the further progress of events. However, it is already apparent that, regardless of all changes, politics still has its influence on media in Serbia. Positions are being taken slowly, but surely, because political instability poses day-to-day threat to new parliamentary elections. If they really happen in February next year, as some predictions indicate, the processes will have to be accelerated. Then we shall see if the division line carved in the case of the attack on convoy carrying the President of Serbia will make the under-frame of future divisions, too.