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MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY OF THE MILITARY

Experiences from Serbia

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Military and the Media

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The development of a new model of relations between the society and the military in Serbia is at the initial stage. A list of changes not yet made in order to replace the partocratic type of civil-military relations with a democratic interaction between the security sector and the political and civil society by far exceeds the list of the changes that have been achieved so far. The reform of the Yugoslav Army as part of the process of democratization of civil-military relations, including the concept of the democratic control of the military as its core element,ⁱ is still ahead. A new constitutional arrangement of the state – of both the Serbia-Montenegro union and of Serbia itself, is in process, giving a strong impetus for rethinking a traditional understanding of defense and military issues as a taboo and a proper domain of “higher politics” only.

Therefore Serbia/Yugoslavia can be rather a reference point for other post-Yugoslav countries for evaluating how much they have progressed along the road of the long-term process of civil-military relations transformation than a source of examples that could be followed. However, Serbian experience can be quite useful in regard to a long-lasting struggle of the civil society for educating the public on the need for democratization of civil-military relations and the role of the media in particular in redesigning the traditional dichotomy between the society and the defense sector and fighting the authoritarian historical legacy.

Serbian experience could show, first, that a desirable result of civil-military relations is not a public trust in the armed forces by itself, but a public trust established on a solid ground, namely on the transparency of the security and defense policies, roles and position of the military in the society, of procedures for decision-making on the use of military power and the military readiness to perform its constitutional tasks;

- second, that the media can produce different, even radically opposed, public images of the military by quite simple professional instruments they employ in their professional routines;
- third, that a public agenda-setting that promotes democratic principles, including the principle of the democratic control of armed forces, is a legitimate function of the media acting in the public interest; and
- fourth, that a more active role of the media in promoting the democratization of civil-military relations requires institutional guarantees for the media autonomy and greater professionalization and specialization of journalists.

1. Public Trust in the Military

A favorable opinion of citizens toward the military is certainly a desirable social goal, both from the point of view of the army and the public. Indeed, modern armies are very interested in inspiring public confidence in the military structures. By tradition, the military has been the most significant integrative institution in most states. According to a global research of values, countries with about one half of the

population having a positive opinion about the army are most numerous on a global scale.ⁱⁱ Serbia now belongs to the group of countries with about three quarters of citizens expressing trust in the army (somewhat more than 70%). The trust in the Yugoslav Army increased highly after the war with NATO in 1999 and also after the dramatic political events in Serbia in October 2000. According to public opinions polls of the Institute of Social Sciences, in 1997, the Yugoslav Army enjoyed the public trust of 43% of citizens. At the end of 1999, it rose to 65% and in October 2000 to 83%.ⁱⁱⁱ The important aspect of this relationship is that the Yugoslav Army ranked very high in popularity among citizens who at the same time expressed a great degree of distrust in almost all other system institutions, especially other core institutions of the regime, the police and judiciary. At the time the Milosevic regime faced a deep legitimization crisis, starting 1997 onwards, the public distrust exceeded trust in regard to all system institutions - political, regime, public service and civil society institutions. However, the trust in the Army was higher than in any other state institutions. The Yugoslav Army ranked third in the public prestige, after educational institutions and the church. In 1999, after the war with NATO, it came to the first place. The greatest number of citizens (34%) chose the Army, among 20 social institutions, as the single most trustworthy one.^{iv} It is interesting to note that at the same time, the same percentage of respondents chose the President of FR Y as the least trusted institution, even though the acting president at the time, Slobodan Milosevic, was the supreme commander of the Army. A great increase in the popularity of the Army – of 22% - after October 2000 came after the refusal of the top military commanders to interfere in the dispute over the election results.

These high fluctuations in the confidence ratings demonstrate a kind of a paradoxical relationship between the public and the Army: while trusting the Army more than others, the public had much less information about it than about other institutions. Since the time of its creation in 1992, the Yugoslav Army has succeeded to remain the institution most closed for the public insight. The interaction of the Army with the public has for long been based on agit-prop mechanisms and propaganda campaigns, aimed at producing the desirable image of the Army which in many aspects did not coincide with its identity. The vital details about the military that enable reliable public knowledge of the country's defense potentials in peacetime and actual behavior of the Army in the armed conflicts it was involved in - the size of the military budget and ways of its spending, modernity of its armament and equipment, material standard, social reputation of the military profession, its place among other Balkan armies in the context of modern military standards, political influences exerted upon it, procedures for making decisions on the employment of the military power, military actions involving civilians – were inaccessible to the public. It could be rightly said that high confidence ratings of the Army were based - apart from historical tradition and national culture that values war as an indispensable tool of the statehood - on public ignorance and non-transparency of the military for the public eye, which made this relationship very delicate and prone to great fluctuations.

The Army was very interested to keep its traditional taboo-status and to hide many of its aspects that are normally accessible to the public in modern democracies behind a very broadly, vaguely, and ideologically

defined “military secret”. During the Milosevic regime, the government as well was active in preventing the public insight in both the defense policy, its agreements with international actors concerning the military forces, and the military actions in wartime. The Yugoslav Army was the last of the state institutions to introduce a regular practice of press conferences. Soon after its beginning in 1998, this practice was abolished because of the Kosovo crisis to be renewed in normal circumstances long after the war had been over. Over the last years journalists in Serbia complained that obtaining information from the Army was more difficult than from other state institutions. The Army representatives more often were uncooperative than cooperative and used to express high suspicion to any kind of journalistic curiosity concerning the military. There were instances that the military representatives simply refused any contacts with the media they were displeased with, which in most cases were the independent media.

This created the situation in which the Army officials could always refer to the high public prestige of the military as an indicator of the non-problematic nature of the relationship between the military and the society and as a proof against the requests for change. In this situation it was also difficult to promote in the public the view of the necessity for changing the civil-military relations. Part of the Serbian media struggled to do this by making the public aware of the non-transparency of defense-related issues which in other societies are subject to civilian and public control, the lack of mechanisms and procedures for the public accountability of the Army, and of general ignorance on some particular issues concerning the military, even if – while mentioning these issues - no real knowledge and facts had been provided. The media would, for example, publish the questions they asked the military officials which they refused to answer. Journalists often pointed to the data about the military that were accessible to citizens of other countries about their armies but not to Serbian citizens about the Yugoslav Army. The media published the views of other sources, out of the military and out of the country, on the Yugoslav Army. They also gave a great publicity to political and civil society actors who demanded a greater transparency of the defense policy, procedures for making decision of their involvement in the armed conflicts and the actual military actions. All these media activities proved quite effective.

In today’s Serbia, the government officials lack the willingness to put the issue of the military reform to the fore. They also often refer to the high military ranking in the public opinion as an indicator of the non-urgent character of the issue of the defense sector reform. By this, they in fact try to justify a low placement of the military reform issue on the political agenda. Therefore, the need for analyzing the basis of the public confidence in the Army remains to be an important task for the civil society actors.

Questioning the public attitude to the military is not an easy task for the media. The Army in particular does not welcome it and sees it rather destructive than beneficial for the society on the whole. However, in a well-regulated environment, which precisely defines the rights of the defense actors and the media actors, a shared interest of the military and the society for mutual confidence should make a basis for a constructive interaction between the military and the media. If it is to be successful and satisfactory, this

interaction presupposes responsible behavior from both sides. In Serbia it could be expected that the Army would restrain from traditional propaganda campaigns and take a more active approach in the communication with the public, using modern public relations techniques, aiming at building the confidence in the armed forces on greater transparency. The media – primarily the independent media – are expected to continue to defend and practice their right to be an autonomous source of information and analysis on the military issues of public interest.

2. Professional instruments in creating the image of the military

During the rule of Milosevic, the Serbian media scene was characterized by a very sharp division between two media camps – the regime controlled media and the independent media. The images of army produced by these two media families were very different, even radically opposed to each other. The regime media produced a highly positive, one-sided image of the military: the Yugoslav Army was politically neutral and in the service of interests of all the citizens; the size of the army was rational and appropriate to the security needs of the country; the operational effectiveness of the military and its fighting power was at a highest degree owing to a high professionalism of the military personnel and in spite of unfavorable financial conditions; the army leadership was highly competent; the number of new conscripts and military academy students was up to expectations. Overall, it was the picture of the army that differed in many aspects from its predecessor, the Yugoslav People's Army and managed to gain a new identity. In contrast, the independent media portrayed the depoliticization of the army as unsuccessful in spite of the army's official efforts to disapprove of political activities of its members. They pictured the top army echelons as dominated by political conservatives and some military officials as overtly pro-regime and undemocratic. In their view, the army was socially marginalized and faced great financial hardship that must have had some consequences on the combat potentials of the servicemen. Additionally, the army was very unattractive for a great number of young conscripts and potential military students. In sum, The Yugoslav Army failed to develop a new identity and retained many of the negative traits of the old JNA.

The image of the army produced by the regime media was over-simplified, focused on very few elements of the Army's identity, and quite rigid. It did not leave much space for interpretations that would differ from the proffered reading of the main features of the army already encoded in the media pictures and words. This image was designed in order to inspire the public trust in the army and not to make the military transparent to the public. During the situations of crisis, as were the armed conflicts with the KLA in 1998 and with NATO in 1999, the image of the Army in the regime media aimed also at stimulating a symbolic transfer of the affirmative attitude towards the Army to the entire political system and the state policy; in this regard, it could be defined as manipulative. The image of the Army in the independent media could not be said to be multi-dimensional, but certainly was to a lesser degree one-sided, included more elements of the identity of the Army, and was less rigid.

The production of these different images was based upon the use of two quite simple media instruments the journalists employ in their everyday professional routines: a selection of sources of information and limitation of a range of issues covered. The state media employed a very narrow selection of sources and a very poor thematic diversity. The independent media did not use any specific professional practices essentially different from those in the regime media. They did not devote much more attention to the military-related issues. In fact, they dealt with the military less than the regime media. This was in particular the case with television. The independent media did not engage in investigative reporting, nor did they dispose with more qualified journalists who could report more analytically. The noted difference was a result of the independent media's use of a much broader list of sources about the Army and presentation of a wide range of opinions on a much wider range of topics. They dealt with some issues concerning the army that were not even touched by the media controlled by the government.

The regime media relied mainly on the official press releases of the official military sources. This type of communication guaranteed the Army a privileged position – the military sources could choose on their own the time for appearing in the public and select the issues and events they wanted to comment on; they could make the initial definition of these events and issues for the public. By relying of the official military sources the regime-controlled media simply reproduced the interpretative frameworks established by the military and enabled the army officials to “dose” the public image of the army. The state media did not give right to any other social actor to speak about the army, but the army itself and specialized journalists who had a special access to the military but behaved without a professional distance. These journalists completely identified themselves with the official army sources both in regard to the selection of occasions that deserved publicity and to the military definitions of events and issues. The views of the Army about itself were never questioned or problematized. This practice of the regime media guaranteed publicity only to one and the same kind of opinion about the army, presenting it uncritically and in a way desirable by the Army.

In contrast, the independent media relied on a range of sources about the military – both from within and outside the Army, including opposition politicians, defense experts, academics, researchers, public activists, army reservists and common people, thus enabling a wide diversity of opinions and presenting the Army in both positive and negative contexts.

The range of topical issues dealt in by the regime media was also very narrow. The aspects of the Army identity most significant to the public were taken out in the dominant type of coverage. The regime media talked about the combat readiness and fighting power of the servicemen which always were presented as highest possible level, about high professionalism of its professional cadre and patriotic orientation of the army personnel, but never or rarely touched the issues that should really be a public concern – modernity of the armed forces, army obligations coming from the agreement on the control of the armament on the Balkans, relations between the army and other system institutions, the army position in regard to political

conflict within the society, political orientations of its top echelons, material standard of the army and its position in comparison to other armies in the Balkan countries, violation of human rights by the Army during the armed conflicts, the attitude of the military towards the war crimes and The Hague Tribunal. The independent media touched some of these issues, but on some they could not provide any information because of the unwillingness of the army sources to disclose information.

The given examples are intended to demonstrate that a more reliable and multi-dimensional picture of the military-related issues can be produced by routine practice of the media – by the extension of a list of sources of information about the military and by giving expert legitimacy to sources emanating from ranks other than military professionals as well as by broadening the range of military-related issues. Journalists' professional obligations include the search for competent sources and for presenting a wide range of views. Although there is a general lack of qualified and independent civil expertise on defense issues, competent sources could surely be found among politicians, academics, social phenomena analysts and researchers, and non-governmental organizations' activists. Professional obligations of journalists in the public media also include the effort for dealing with as wide as possible range of issues that are in the interest of the public, even if they are not desirable to be dealt with publicly by the Army.

3. Agenda-setting function of the media

The media have an important function in creating the list of public priorities, i.e. in setting the public agenda. Communication researchers have long established that if media cannot be proved to impose some particular opinion or preference on the audience, they are certainly successful in turning their attention to some sets of issues rather than others: if the media cannot persuade the public how to think about an issue they can direct the audience to a list of issues it should think about.

This agenda-setting function of the media – i.e. making a priority list of relevant social issues as well as stimulating a public debate on these issues - is a legitimate role of the media. The media serving the public interest therefore should be expected to actively promote the issue of the democratization of civil-military relations as important part of the public agenda. Placing the civil-military relations as a major issue on the media agenda is especially important in situations when this issue is the priority of neither the government, political parties nor the armed forces.

The past experience demonstrates that the issues of civil-military relations got on prominence in the media agenda usually in crisis situations or in the situations of affairs or scandals, tending to be forgotten after the situation would loosen up. Although this has given some positive results, as in the case of rising the public awareness about the necessity for depoliticizing the military,^v the media reacting on only incidental situations has a negative effect of reducing the domain of civil-military relations to just one aspect that is relevant for the given situation. Additionally, a debate on the given issues in such situations is usually more

emotional than rational and therefore more directed to partial than complete and long-term solutions. In recent times, there were several affairs demonstrating unsettled relations between the military and civil sectors – the alleged ear-dropping of President of Yugoslavia and plan for a military action in the Serbian Government Information Office, the spy-affair involving the ex-commander of the Army General Staff Momcilo Perisic, selling of the armament to Iraq. The media paid a great attention to each one while there was political interest to keep them important, but most media outlets dropped the topic with a decrease of political interest in the affairs, although none of these controversies was completely solved.

Of course, it is in the nature of the media to quickly turn their attention from one to another topical issue, but keeping the interest of the public on an issue only as long as it serves some particular political interest is not a proper function of the media acting in the public interest. To the contrary, preserving some issues on the media agenda, if they really concern the wider interest of the public, after they lose their topicality in the political domain, is a proper function of the public service media. It is a professional decision and the one of a kind that makes a difference between the media. At present moment, the main difference between the media in Serbia, which - after October 2000 - are characterized by more similarities than differences, concerns the media treatment of the issue of responsibility for war crimes and reconciliation of the Serbian people with other nations in the region. Although there is little political willingness to keep this issue on the public agenda, some media, together with some enlightened civil society actors, by a purposeful effort, stimulate the public interest in the topic and act as the most important forum for a public debate on the related issues. These same media differed in comparison to others in the way they treated the affairs concerning the military forces. They paid these issues more importance than the media close to the government, questioned the use of these affairs as weapons in the political conflict between the ruling Democratic Party and Democratic Party of Serbia, and criticized the government for postponing the reform of the defense sector.

It is important that the media regard the controversial issues related to the armed forces through the concept of the democratic control of armed forces. This does not necessarily imply the use of these words in the media headlines and texts. It rather means that a general framework in which the controversial issues are set and discussed is the idea that the dependence of the military on the society's resources gives the right to the public to have its own say on the limits of the size of the army, its optimal structure and priority goals. In this way the media can help develop the culture of public accountability of the military, which is greatly lacking in post-communist countries.

First, however, the concept of the democratic control of the armed forces has to become part of journalists' professional knowledge and accepted as a value per se.

4. Capability of the media for playing an active role in the development of civil-military relations

The media could play a more active role in the process of democratization of civil-military relations under certain conditions. These include system guarantees for the autonomous position of the media and greater professionalization and specialization of journalists.

The expectations that the media will have the leading role in creating the democratic infrastructure of post-communist societies from the very beginning have proven to be quite unrealistic. A necessary requirement for such a position of the media is the "disentanglement" of the media relations with the state structures and liberation of the media of a status of a mechanism in service of parties, classes or other groups, which by itself is a long and slow process. In most post-communist countries, the most conservative factor of mass communication that hinders this process has proven to be political power. Still, in most countries the reconstruction of the media system has passed the stage of establishing legal guarantees for the media autonomy. In regard to civil-military relations, a necessary condition for a more active role of the media is the law guaranteeing free access to public information. It should provide for maximum affordable transparency of the defense policy and the armed forces and precisely codify types of information that are declared state and military secrets.

Another requirement is a stable economic position of the media that enables them to make long-term development plans and develop the necessary professionalization and specialization of journalists. A paradox of the media situation in Serbia, like in other transition countries, is that it is the big media that can afford great specialization of journalists while at the same time they are quite dependent on the government and their professional ideology more easily accepts the media as the instrument of the ruling establishment than of the public. The independent media dispose with fewer resources, are underdeveloped and economically cannot afford great specialization of their journalists and therefore should be helped in this regard.

Journalists who specialize in military issues are quite rare in the media in general, and especially in the independent media. These rare specialists are more often acquainted with professional military issues than with military sociology and issues concerning the role of the public in making the military publicly accountable.

Realizing this deficiency, the Belgrade Center for Civil-Military relations, in cooperation with the Media Center, organized an educational seminar for journalists in Serbia and Montenegro in order to familiarize them with the concept of the civilian control of the military and police, the mechanisms and procedures of civilian control which exists in other countries and possibilities in Serbia for developing the civilian control. The Center organized 12 seminars in 10 cities in Serbia and Montenegro for about 100 journalists during the year of 2000. The participants' evaluations of the seminar were very positive. They regarded the seminar as very useful for their education on the topic they knew very little about. Most participants also

regarded the seminar useful for their understanding of the importance of the relations between the military and the public for the democratic transformation of the country.

ⁱ The attitude of the Yugoslav Army towards the concept of the democratic control of armed forces has radically shifted. Two years ago, in spring 2001, after the controversies concerning the role of the military in dramatic events around the arrest of Slobodan Milosevic, the Yugoslav Army referred to public requests for greater transparency of the decision-making concerning the use of military power as to attempts for the “so called democratic control of the military”. In fact, the official speaker of the Yugoslav Army accused the advocates of this idea and the media that gave it a wide publicity, as well as “numerous peace movements, foundations, parties, non-governmental and humanitarian organizations, sects and groups” for efforts aiming at “destabilizing, demoralizing and demotivating the Army”, while at the same time “not understanding the nature of the military, being ignorant of defense-security regulation”, and “forgetting the achievement of the Army over the last ten years”. To make the irony greater, this was said at a press conference, held by the official Army speaker, designed as an appeal of the Army for “optimization of cooperation between the Yugoslav Army and the media”. In the view of the Army, this cooperation was much needed because the nation and the state were facing “perhaps the greatest historical danger so far”. Only several months later the same army official held another press conference focusing on the issue of the civilian control of the military and expressed the support of the Yugoslav Army to, as he termed it, “institutional control of the Army” and listed the advantages the Yugoslav Army had from the civilian control. In their public appearances the Yugoslav Army officials today almost ritually confirm their commitment to the democratic control of armed forces and welcome the potential contribution of both “institutionalized” and civil-society actors, including the media, in re-arranging the civil-military relations.

ⁱⁱ Public popularity of the military in various countries over the world is studied in the World Value Survey. See: Slavujevic, Zoran and Mihailovic, Srecko (1999) *Dva ogleđa o legitimitetu: javno mnjenje o legitimitetu treće Jugoslavije*, Beograd: Institut društvenih nauka, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (Two Essays on Legitimacy: Public Opinion about the Legitimacy of the Third Yugoslavia, Belgrade: Institute of Social Sciences, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung).

ⁱⁱⁱ The public opinion poll data on the public confidence in the Yugoslav Army are presented on the website of the Center for Political Studies and Public Opinion Research of the Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade (www.cpijm.org).

^{iv} For more details see: Slavujevic, Zoran (2000) “Razmere nelegitimnosti politickog sistema i njegovih institucija” (Proportions of Illegitimacy of the Political System and its Institutions”); Mihailovic, Srecko (ed.) *Javno mnjenje Srbije: Izmedju razocarenja i nade* (Public Opinion in Serbia: Between Disappointment and Hope), Beograd: Centar za proucavanje alternativa, UGS “Nezavisnost”, Udruzenje za unapredjivanje empirijskih istrazivanja (Center for Alternative Studies, UGS “Nezavisnost, Association for the Advancement of Empirical Studies).

^v A potential involvement of the military in political conflicts has often been an important issue in the Serbian media because of the nature of the long-lasting conflict between the government and the opposition.
